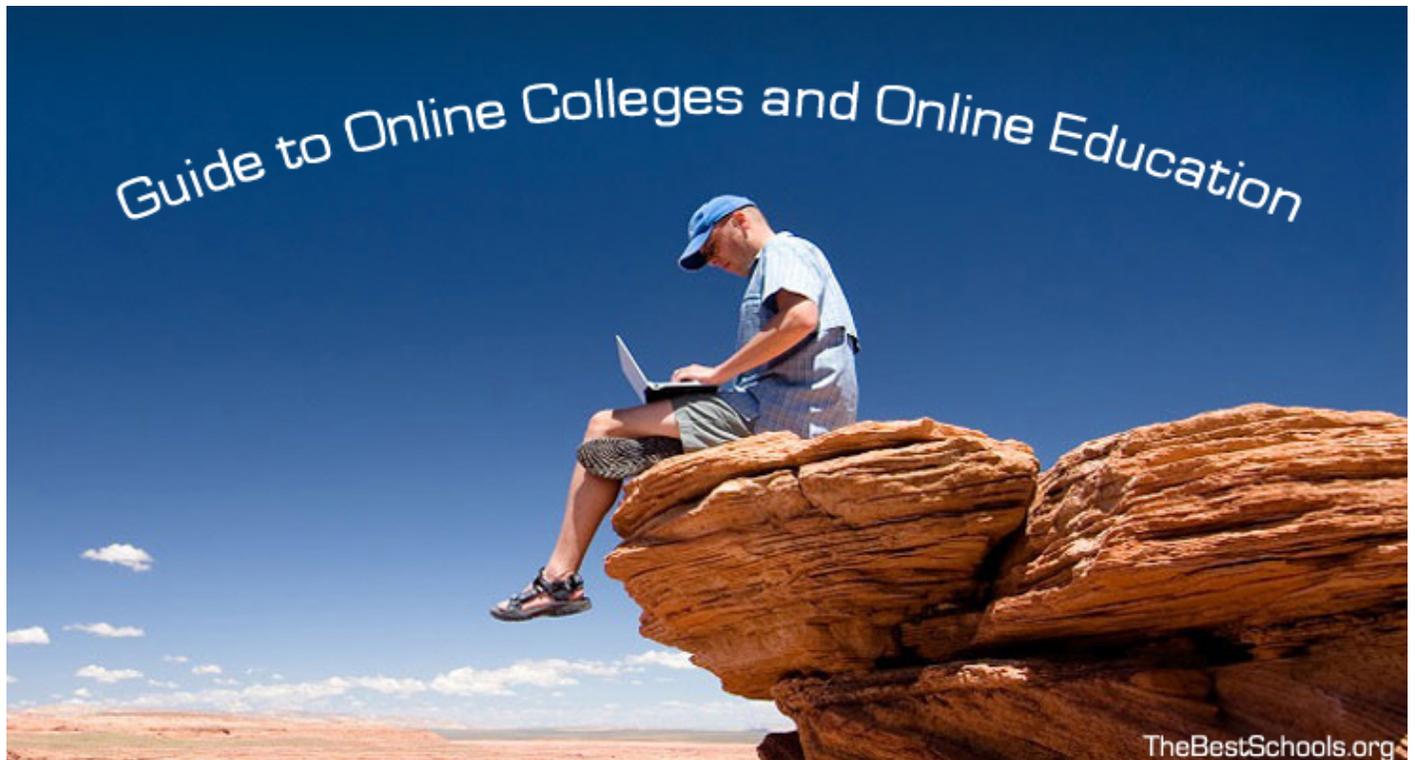




The 50 Best Online Colleges for 2015–2016



Online colleges and online education more generally have seen an enormous increase in student e-learners over the last decade. Ten years ago, America saw around 2 million higher education students learning online. That number has now almost quadrupled.

According to a 2015 report by Babson Research titled [Tracking Online Education in the United States](#), today the number of college students learning online exceeds 7 million. With the overall higher education student body in the U.S. currently at 21 million, that means one out of three college students is taking at least one course entirely online.

It's therefore no surprise that online colleges and universities, which focus on delivering

course content exclusively online, have proliferated. These schools enable students to finish a degree program and graduate with little more than a laptop and internet connection.

Nonetheless, online colleges and universities differ widely in quality. Moreover, with increasing competition for online students, many campus-based schools are now getting into the mix and offering online degrees. For this reason, rankings of online colleges and universities need to be regularly updated. Hence this ranking of the top 50 online colleges for 2015–16.

Although online education gives students unrivaled flexibility in pursuing a degree program, it is not right for everyone. Online education requires self-discipline and a set of study skills that some students on first attending college may lack. For this reason, we have supplemented this ranking with our highly informative “[Savvy Student’s Guide to Online Colleges and Online Education](#)” (located below right after our ranking).

Together, our ranking of the 50 best online colleges and universities for 2015–16 as well as our student guide to online colleges and online education provide the most comprehensive resource available on the web for helping prospective students determine whether online education is right for them and, if so, deciding which online college is best for them.

This ranking of the best online colleges and universities is based on extensive research and familiarity with American online education. In formulating this ranking, we looked to such factors as academic excellence, scholarly strength of faculty, online teaching methods, tuition costs, reputation, awards, financial aid, and range of degree programs offered.

This ranking of the best online colleges and universities, along with the [supplemental student guide](#) at the end, is meant to help you, the prospective student, make wise choices about your online education. This ranking identifies colleges and universities offering a high-quality online education. Note that traditional campus-based schools appear here only if they offer an extensive and robust array of online degree programs.



* * *

The 50 Best Online Colleges for 2015–2016

1 Penn State World Campus



(State College, PA)

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Launched in 1998, Penn State World Campus is the online campus of the highly respected Pennsylvania State University.

Penn State World Campus offers has an impressive list of online programs, with more than 120 online programs leading to a variety of undergraduate and graduate degrees, as well as certificate programs.

Penn State World Campus's online offerings include degrees in fields such as technology, engineering, education, healthcare, business, and more.

Penn State World Campus enrolls more than 10,000 students. After the initial acceptance into the World Campus, students must receive acceptance into the appropriate college for their chosen major at Pennsylvania State University.

Online students receive instruction from the same world-class faculty members as on-campus students. Online students have access to academic advisers, career services, online tutoring, and library services.

World Campus offers courses in an asynchronous format, so students can complete coursework on their schedule. Students must complete readings, assignments, discussions, and exams by set deadlines. Some of Penn State World Campus's graduate degree programs require a residency period of from a few days to two weeks in length.

Penn State World Campus graduates earn the same degree as traditional Penn State students. Graduates can join the largest alumni network in the United States.

The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education recognizes the Pennsylvania State University–Main Campus as a research university with very high research activity.

U.S. News & World Report ranked Pennsylvania State University–University Park #48 in National Universities in its 2015 edition of Best Colleges. The magazine also ranked the university #52 in its listing of Best Global Universities, #41 in its Best Business Schools list, and #33 in the Best Education Schools list. Penn State also tied for #14 in the magazine's Top Public Schools list.

Academic Ranking of World Universities 2014 (provided by the Center for World-Class Universities at Shanghai Jiao Tong University) ranked Pennsylvania State University–University Park #58. The university also received a #58 ranking from *Times Higher Education’s* World University Rankings 2014–2015.

Princeton Review included Pennsylvania State University–University Park in its 2015 Best 379 Colleges list, while *Forbes* ranked Penn State #76 among Research Universities.

Penn State’s Smeal College of Business ranked #30 in *Bloomberg Business’s* 2014 Undergraduate Business School Programs list.

A member of the Association of American Universities (an association of excellent North American research universities), Pennsylvania State University received accreditation from the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools.

Pennsylvania State University’s Smeal College of Business also received accreditation from the respected Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business.

2 University of Florida Distance Learning



The University of Florida, a public, sea-grant, space-grant, and land-grant research university established in 1853, enrolls more than 49,900 students. Consistently ranked among the top universities in the United States, the University of Florida offers more than 300 undergraduate and graduate degree programs.

A member of the State University System of Florida, the university has 16 colleges and more than 150 research centers and institutes. The University of Florida has a membership in the Association of American Universities (an association of excellent North American research universities).

Recognized for providing high-value education to students, the University of Florida offers a variety of online programs leading to bachelor, bachelor completion, master, specialist, and doctoral degrees. The university also offers a handful of international degree programs.

Undergraduate and graduate degree topics include environmental management in agriculture and natural resources, health education, biology, entomology, industrial and systems engineering, and Latin. Students also can pursue doctoral degrees in education, audiology, philosophy, classical studies, nursing practice, and pharmacy.

Applicants must meet the university's general admission requirements and those specified by the degree program.

Distance learning students can access a variety of support services, such as an online course management system, library resources, career services, and an online registration system. University of Florida Distance Learning graduates can join an alumni network of more than 300,000 worldwide.

The University of Florida is one of the largest research universities in the nation. The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education recognizes the University of Florida as a research university with very high research activity. The university is one of the leading universities in the United States in acquiring patents for research. Researchers at the University of Florida invented Gatorade.

U.S. News & World Report ranked the University of Florida #48 in National Universities in its 2015 edition of Best Colleges. The university tied for #14 among Top Public Schools and #53 among Best Global Universities in the magazine's listings. *U.S. News & World Report* also ranked the University of Florida #41 in Best Business Schools and #30 in Best Education Schools.

The University of Florida ranked #78 in the Academic Ranking of World Universities 2014 (provided by the Center for World-Class Universities at Shanghai Jiao Tong University). In addition, the University of Florida ranked #126 in *Times Higher Education's* World University Rankings 2014–2015.

Bloomberg Business ranked the University of Florida Warrington College of Business Administration #44 among Undergraduate Business School Programs, while *Forbes* ranked the University of Florida #42 in Research Universities.

Princeton Review included the University of Florida in its 2015 Best 379 Colleges list.

The University of Florida received accreditation from the respected Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.



(Shrewsbury, MA)

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The University of Massachusetts, a public university system established in 1863, enrolls about 71,000 students across five campuses. The University of Massachusetts consists of four universities, a satellite campus, and a medical school.

UMass Online, the online consortium of the highly respected University of Massachusetts system, offers a variety of undergraduate and graduate (including doctoral) degree programs.

UMass Online's degree offerings include an associate's degree in information technology and more than 30 bachelor's degree programs, including degree completion programs in topics such as nursing, applied psychology, criminal justice, and more.

The university also offers nearly 40 master's degree programs in topics including gerontology, security studies, and vision studies; a doctoral degree in nursing practice; and dozens of certificate programs.

Online students receive instruction from the same faculty, earn the same degrees, and attend the same graduation ceremony as on-campus students. UMass Online students

have access to a host of services, such as library help, fellowship advising, and academic counseling.

UMass Online received the Excellence in Distance Teaching Education award from the United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA).

The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education recognized University of Massachusetts–Amherst as a research university with very high research activity and recognized University of Massachusetts–Boston and University of Massachusetts–Lowell as research universities with high research activity.

UMass has a reputation for high-level research in numerous fields, such as nanotechnology, bioinformatics, renewable energy, remote sensing, vaccine development, and chemistry.

U.S. News & World Report ranked the University of Massachusetts–Amherst #76 in the 2015 edition of Best Colleges in National Universities. The magazine also ranked UMass #115 in Best Global Universities and #42 in Best Education Schools. UMass also tied for #30 among Top Public Schools.

The University of Massachusetts–Amherst ranked 101–150 in the Academic Ranking of World Universities 2014 (provided by the Center for World-Class Universities at Shanghai Jiao Tong University).

Times Higher Education listed UMass #91 in its World University Rankings 2014–2015. In addition, *Forbes* ranked UMass #100 in Research Universities, while *Princeton Review* included University of Massachusetts–Amherst in its 2015 Best 379 Colleges list.

University of Massachusetts–Amherst’s Isenberg School of Management ranked #36 in *Bloomberg Business*’s 2014 Undergraduate Business School Programs list.

The respected Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business provides accreditation to the University of Massachusetts branches in Amherst, Boston, Dartmouth and Lowell. The University of Massachusetts also holds accreditation from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges.

4 Boston University



(Boston, MA)

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Boston University, a nonsectarian, private research university established in 1839, enrolls about 33,000 students across 18 colleges and schools. Boston University, one of the largest independent, non-profit universities in the United States, boasts more than 250,000 alumni worldwide. Boston University operates one of the strongest private research programs in the United States.

The university offers a variety of bachelor, master, doctoral, and professional degrees. Boston University offers a host of online undergraduate courses, as well as a variety of online degree programs such as an online bachelor's degree completion program; nine master's degree programs, including management, taxation law, and art education; and doctoral programs in music education and occupational therapy. The university also offers more than a dozen certificate programs.

Boston University's online students have access to a variety of services, including library

resources, career services, and tutoring.

The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education recognizes Boston University as a research university with very high research activity.

U.S. News & World Report ranked Boston University #42 among National Universities in its 2015 edition of Best Colleges. Boston University also tied for #37 in the magazine's list of Best Global Universities. The magazine also ranked Boston University #45 among Best Business Schools and #51 among Best Education Schools.

Boston University's School of Management earned a 25th-place ranking in *Bloomberg Business's* 2014 Undergraduate Business School Programs list.

Forbes ranked the university #43 in Research Universities, while *Princeton Review* included Boston University in its 2015 Best 379 Colleges list.

The Academic Ranking of World Universities 2014 (provided by the Center for World-Class Universities at Shanghai Jiao Tong University) ranked Boston University #72. In addition, Boston University ranked #57 in the *Times Higher Education's* World University Rankings 2014–2015.

A member of the Association of American Universities (an association of excellent North American research universities), Boston University holds accreditation from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. Boston University's School of Management holds accreditation from the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business.

5 Northeastern University



(Boston, MA)

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Northeastern University, a private, non-profit research university established in 1898, enrolls about 20,000 students across nine colleges and schools, as well as graduate campuses in North Carolina and Washington State.

Northeastern University offers nearly 200 programs leading to a variety of undergraduate and graduate (including doctoral) degrees. The university is a leader in cooperative education and other types of experimental learning.

Northeastern University's offerings include more than 60 online degree programs, which give students the flexibility to earn their degree on their own schedule.

Northeastern University's online programs include nearly 20 bachelor's degrees in English, finance, and political science; more than two dozen master's degrees, including taxation, respiratory care, leadership, and homeland security; and doctoral degrees in education and transitional physical therapy. The university also offers more than 20 certificate programs in a range of topics.

The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education recognizes Northeastern University as a research university with high research activity. Northeastern University has over 30 federally funded research centers.

U.S. News & World Report ranked Northeastern University #42 in its 2015 edition of Best Colleges in National Universities, as well as #52 in its Best Business School list. Northeastern University also tied for #224 in the magazine's list of Best Global Universities.

Northeastern University ranked #185 in *Times Higher Education's* World University Rankings 2014–2015. *Forbes* ranked the university #95 in Research Universities. *Princeton Review* also included Northeastern University in its 2015 Best 379 Colleges list.

Northeastern University holds accreditation from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. Northeastern University's D'Amore-McKim School of Business also holds accreditation from the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business.

6 Indiana University, IU Online



Indiana University, a public university system founded in 1820, enrolls more than 110,000 students across nine campuses and two centers. Indiana University, a member of the Association of American Universities (an association of excellent North American research universities), offers a host of degree programs and boasts more than 580,000 alumni. Indiana University-Bloomington attracts students from all over the world.

Through IU Online, Indiana University offers hundreds of online classes and more than 100 degree programs.

Students can pursue a variety of associate and bachelor degree programs, including nine degree completion programs such as business administration, mathematics, political science, and nursing.

IU Online also offers more than two dozen online master degree programs ranging from strategic management to social work to data science and more. Students also can earn doctoral degrees in instructional systems technology, nursing practice, and nursing science. Online students also can choose from a variety of certificate programs.

IU Online students have access to libraries and technology resources.

The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education recognizes Indiana University-Bloomington as a research university with very high research activity. The university provides world-class contributions in research.

U.S. News & World Report ranked Indiana University #76 in National Universities in the 2015 edition of Best Colleges. The magazine also ranked Indiana University #21 in Best Business Schools and #25 in Best Education Schools. Indiana University also tied for #30 in the magazine's list of Top Public Schools and ranked #115 among Best Global Universities.

The Academic Ranking of World Universities 2014, provided by the Center for World-Class Universities at Shanghai Jiao Tong University, ranked Indiana University-Bloomington 101-150. In addition, the university ranked #150 in *Times Higher Education's*

World University Rankings 2014–2015.

Forbes ranked Indiana University #47 in Research Universities. *Princeton Review* listed Indiana University–Bloomington among the 2015 Best 379 Colleges, while the university’s Kelly School of Business ranked #8 in *Bloomberg Business*’s 2014 Undergraduate Business School Programs.

The respected Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business provided accreditation to Indiana University, Bloomington–Indianapolis. Indiana University also holds accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission.

7 Arizona State University, ASU Online



(Phoenix, AZ)

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Arizona State University (ASU), a public research university founded in 1885, is the largest public university in the United States by enrollment. ASU enrolls nearly 100,000 students across 16 colleges and schools. Arizona State University offers a variety of bachelor, master, and doctoral degrees. ASU is one of the world’s top universities for

business incubation.

The university provides an array of highly ranked graduate programs. Arizona State University offers about 90 undergraduate and graduate (including doctoral) degree programs, as well as more than a dozen certificate programs through ASU Online. ASU Online's degree offerings include bachelor's degrees in art history, business, film, and justice studies. The university also offers master's degrees in legal studies, nutrition, English, electrical engineering, and more.

Students also can pursue doctoral degrees in behavioral health and leadership and innovation.

ASU Online students have access to enrollment counselors, academic advisers, and success coaches. ASU Online offers six start dates each year.

Online students have flexibility to complete coursework on their own schedule. Some ASU Online courses require specific log-on times, and most have set assignments and deadlines.

The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education recognizes Arizona State University as a research university with very high research activity. ASU consistently ranks among the top 20 universities, which don't have a traditional medical school, for research expenditures.

U.S. News & World Report ranked Arizona State University-Tempe #129 in National Universities in its 2015 edition of Best Colleges. Arizona State University also tied for #63 in Top Public Schools and #143 in Best Global Universities. The magazine also listed Arizona State #27 in Best Business Schools.

The Academic Ranking of World Universities 2014 (provided by the Center for World-Class Universities at Shanghai Jiao Tong University) ranked Arizona State University #88. *Times Higher Education* listed Arizona State University #182 in its World University Rankings 2014–2015, while *Forbes* ranked the university #140 among Research Universities.

Arizona State University's W.P. Carey School of Business ranked #92 in *Bloomberg Business's* 2014 Undergraduate Business School Programs list. *Princeton Review* included Arizona State University in its 2015 Best 379 Colleges list.

The respected Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business provides accreditation to Arizona State University's W.P. Carey School of Business. Arizona State University also holds accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission.

8 Florida State University, Office of Distance Learning



(Tallahassee, FL)

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Florida State University (FSU), a sea-grant and space-grant public research university founded in 1851, consists of 16 colleges and more than 100 facilities, centers, facilities, and labs. Florida State University, known for its nationally ranked academic programs, enrolls about 42,000 students in more than 300 programs of study leading to a variety of undergraduate, graduate, and professional degrees.

All the colleges and schools provide graduate degrees. FSU provides combined BA/MA programs. FSU has strong foundations in the sciences, with meteorology, biology, and chemistry ranked among the school's best programs.

Through the Office of Distance Learning, FSU offers online degrees with courses which follow a semester schedule. Florida State University's online undergraduate degree programs require students to have completed 60 or more semester hours of transferable credit, including all liberal arts requirements.

Florida State University offers bachelor's degrees in public safety and security, computer science, criminology, and interdisciplinary social science; nearly 20 master's degrees such as business administration, communication disorders, criminology, educational leadership/administration, and nurse educator; post-master's degree programs in educational leadership/administration, and library and information systems; and numerous certificate programs.

FSU offers most online courses in an asynchronous format.

The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education recognizes Florida State University as a research university with very high research activity. FSU has over 50 prominent research centers and institutes.

U.S. News & World Report ranked Florida State University #95 in National Universities in its 2015 edition of Best Colleges. The magazine also ranked Florida State #39 in Best Education Schools and #172 in Best Global Universities. Florida State University also tied for #43 in Top Public Schools.

Bloomberg Business ranked Florida State University's College of Business #85 in its 2014 list of Undergraduate Business School Programs. *Forbes* ranked Florida State #102 in Research Universities, while *Princeton Review* included FSU among the 2015 Best 379 Colleges.

The respected Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business provided accreditation to Florida State University's College of Business. Florida State University also holds accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.



(Philadelphia, PA)

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Drexel University, a private research university founded in 1891, offers nearly 200 programs leading to a variety of undergraduate, graduate (including doctoral), and professional degrees. Drexel University enrolls about 25,500 students across more than a dozen colleges and schools. Drexel University has one of the nation's largest cooperative education programs.

Drexel University Online awards nine bachelor's degrees in business administration, criminology, computing and security technology, and psychology; and about 60 master's degree programs ranging from communication to systems engineering to cybersecurity.

Drexel Online also offers about 80 certificate programs, as well as doctoral programs in educational leadership and management, health science in rehabilitation sciences, and nursing practice. Drexel University offers some of its degree programs in an accelerated format.

Online students receive instruction from the same faculty and earn the same degrees as

on-campus students. Drexel University received the Sloan-C Award for Excellence in Institution-Wide Online Education.

The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education recognizes Drexel University as a research university with high research activity. Drexel University has over \$110 million in yearly expenditures for sponsored research projects. The university has traditional research strength in biotechnology, information science, basic science, engineering, and business.

U.S. News & World Report ranked Drexel University #95 in National Universities in the 2015 edition of Best Colleges. The magazine also ranked Drexel University #169 in Best Education Schools and #396 in Best Global Universities.

Bloomberg Business ranked Drexel University's LeBow College of Business #106 among 2014 Undergraduate Business School Programs. *Forbes* ranked Drexel University #129 in Research Universities, while *Princeton Review* included Drexel in its 2015 Best 379 Colleges list.

The respected Association of Advance College Schools of Business provides accreditation to Drexel University's Breech School of Business Administration and Economics. Drexel University also holds accreditation from the Middle State Commission on Higher Education.

10

Oregon State University, OSU Ecampus



(Corvallis, OR)

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Oregon State University (OSU), a public research university, founded in 1868, enrolls more than 30,000 students across a dozen colleges and a graduate school. OSU, a prominent research school, has nationally recognized programs in areas such as agricultural sciences, forestry, fisheries, community health, pharmacy, and wildlife management.

OSU is one of only six educational institutions in the United States with a land-grant, space-grant, and sea-grant designations. OSU also has a sun-grant designation.

Oregon State University, which offers more than 200 undergraduate and graduate (including doctoral) degree programs, is home to the internationally renowned Center for Gene Research and Biotechnology.

Oregon State University offers more than 900 online courses and a host of degree programs through OSU Ecampus. The university's online offerings include nearly 20 bachelor's degrees in topics ranging from anthropology to German to sustainability; nine master's degrees such as executive leadership, counseling, and natural resources; and doctoral degrees in education and counseling. The university also offers certificate

programs, as well as chemistry and foreign language courses.

OSU Ecampus allows students to access course materials on their schedule and earn the same degree as on-campus students. Online students have access to a host of student services such as library resources, career services, 24/7 tutoring help, and counseling services.

The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education recognizes Oregon State University as a research university with very high research activity.

U.S. News & World Report ranked Oregon State University #138 in National Universities in the 2015 edition of Best Colleges. The magazine also ranked Oregon State University #106 in Best Education Schools, while the university tied for #70 in Top Public Schools and #250 in Best Global Universities.

The Academic Ranking of World Universities 2014 (provided by the Center for World-Class Universities at Shanghai Jiao Tong University), ranked Oregon State University 151–200. In addition, *Forbes* ranked Oregon State University #128 in Research Universities.

The respected Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business provides accreditation to Oregon State University's College of Business. Oregon State University also holds accreditation from the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities.

11 Rochester Institute of Technology, RIT Online



(Henrietta, NY)

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Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), a private university founded in 1829, consists of nine academic colleges, including the National Technical Institute for the Deaf. Rochester Institute of Technology, a career-oriented technology-focused school, enrolls more than 18,000 students in more than 200 academic programs leading to undergraduate and graduate (including doctoral) degree programs.

RIT has students from all 50 states and from more than 100 countries. RIT belongs to the Rochester Area College Consortium, a conglomeration of colleges and universities.

Besides technology and science programs, RIT provides programs in business, arts and design, and liberal arts. Every RIT academic program provides students some type of experimental education opportunity, such as cooperative education, internships, study abroad, or undergraduate research. The RIT Cooperative Education program, one of the world's largest, provides students career-related work experience in numerous degree programs.

Rochester Institute of Technology, through RIT Online, offers online associate and bachelor degree programs in applied arts and sciences; more than a dozen master's

degree programs, such as applied statistics, imaging science, and manufacturing leadership; and a host of certificate programs.

RIT Online offers several start dates each year and allows students flexibility to complete coursework on their schedule. RIT Online students have access to enrollment advising and academic support. The instructors who teach the on-campus classes also teach the online classes.

U.S. News & World Report ranked Rochester Institute of Technology #8 in Regional Universities (North) in the 2015 edition of Best Colleges. *Bloomberg Business* listed Rochester Institute of Technology's Saunders College of Business #91 in its list of 2014 Undergraduate Business School Programs. *Princeton Review* included RIT among the 2105 Best 379 Colleges.

The respected Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business provides accreditation to Rochester Institute of Technology's Saunders College of Business. Rochester Institute of Technology also holds accreditation from the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools.

12 Washington State University Global Campus



(Pullman, WA)

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Washington State University (WSU), a non-profit, public research university founded in 1890, enrolls about 28,000 students. A land-grant university, Washington State University offers 200 fields of study leading to bachelor, master, and doctoral degrees.

WSU has received recognition for numerous programs, including animal science, food science, plant science, chemical engineering, veterinary medicine, and architecture.

Launched in 2012, Washington State University's Global Campus offers nine online bachelor's degrees such as accounting, criminal justice, hospitality business management, and psychology; and a dozen master's degrees in topics including special education, agriculture, molecular biosciences, and criminal justice. Students also can pursue a host of online certificates, as well as three teaching endorsements.

Washington State University faculty and instructors teach the Global Campus courses, based on the same principles as the on-campus programs. Online students have access to academic advisers, 24/7 tech support, free online tutoring, and a writing lab.

The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education recognizes Washington State University as a research university with very high research activity.

U.S. News & World Report ranked Washington State University #138 in its 2015 edition of Best Colleges in National Universities. The university also tied for #325 among Best Global Universities in the magazine's list.

Forbes ranked Washington State University #144 in Research Universities, while *Princeton Review* included the university in its 2015 Best 379 Colleges list.

The respected Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business provides accreditation to Washington State University's Carson College of Business. Washington State University also holds accreditation from the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities.

13 Mizzou Online, University of Missouri



The University of Missouri, a public research university founded in 1839, enrolls about 35,400 students across 19 academic colleges. The university has students from every state in the nation and from about 120 countries.

The University of Missouri, the flagship of the University of Missouri System, offers more than 300 programs leading to a variety of undergraduate and graduate (including doctoral) degrees.

The University of Missouri offers more than 90 online degrees and certificates through Mizzou Online. Mizzou Online's degree offerings include nine bachelor's degrees, such as health sciences, early childhood education, nursing, and hospitality management; more than 40 master's degree in topics including architectural studies, gerontology, and interactive media; and nearly a dozen doctoral programs ranging from education to nursing. The university also offers education specialist programs.

Students can complete most programs 100-percent online, but some do require on-campus attendance. Students should check their specific program before enrolling.

Mizzou Online's semester-based courses have the same enrollment period as traditional on-campus classes. Online and on-campus courses also often have the same start and end dates.

Online students have flexibility to complete assignments on their schedule by specific deadlines. Mizzou Online's courses may have synchronous and asynchronous elements.

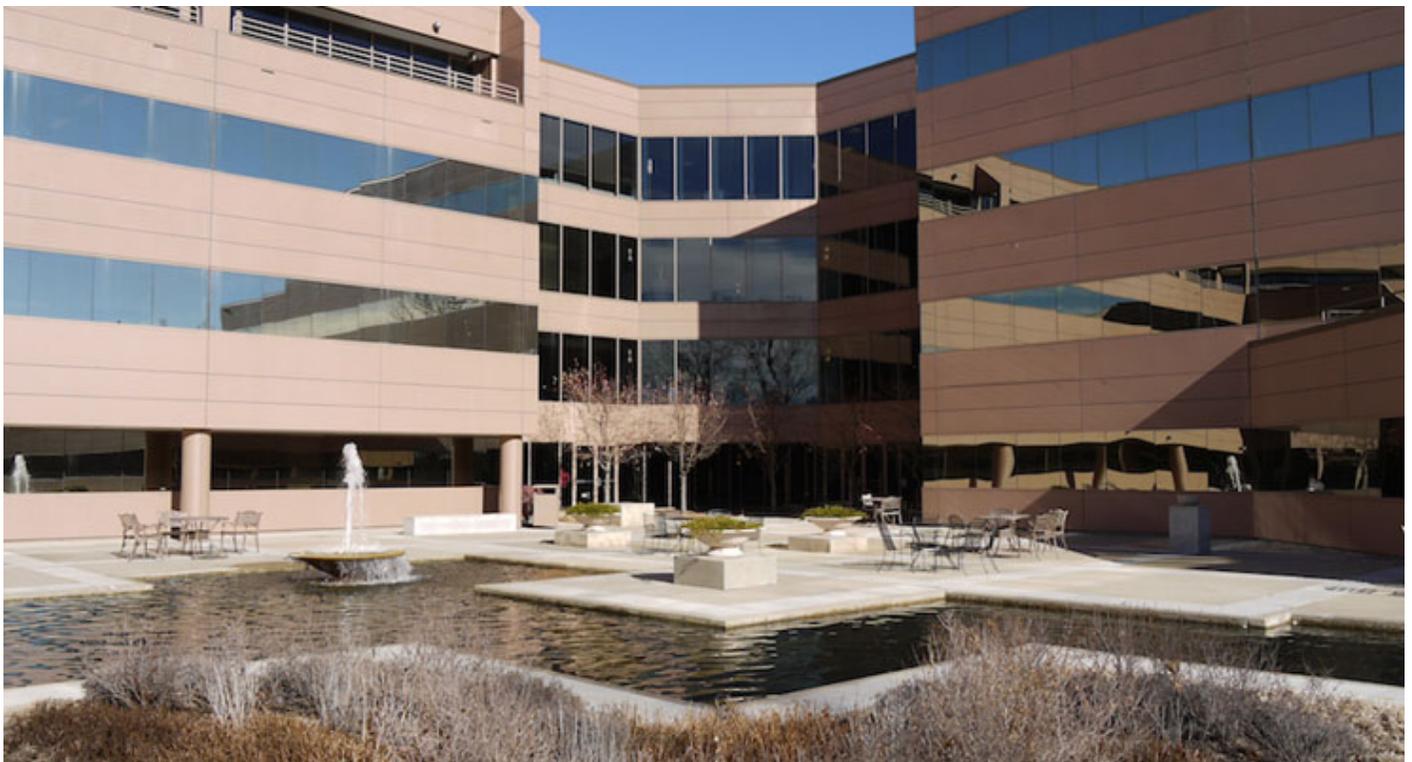
The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education recognizes the University of Missouri-Columbia as a research university with very high research activity.

U.S. News & World Report ranked the University of Missouri #99 in National Universities in the 2015 edition of Best Colleges. The magazine also ranked the university #58 among Best Business Schools and #55 among Best Education Schools. The University of Missouri also tied for #288 in the magazine's list of Best Global Universities.

The University of Missouri's Trulaske College of Business ranked #88 in *Bloomberg Business's* 2014 Undergraduate Business School Programs, while *Forbes* listed the university #104 in Research Universities. In addition, *Princeton Review* included the University of Missouri among its 2015 Best 379 Colleges.

The University of Missouri-Columbia is a member of the Association of American Universities (an association of excellent North American research universities). The respected Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business provides accreditation to University of Missouri's Robert J. Trulaske Sr. College of Business. The University of Missouri also holds accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association.

14 Colorado State University-Global Campus



(Greenwood Village, CO)

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Colorado State University-Global Campus, an online, public university founded in 2007, offers a host of bachelor's completion and master's degrees, as well as undergraduate and graduate certificate programs. A member of the Colorado State University System,

Colorado State University-Global Campus enrolls more than 7,000 students.

Colorado State University-Global Campus's degree offerings include more than a dozen bachelor completion programs, such as accounting, communication, project management, and organizational leadership; and master's degrees ranging from management to criminal justice to healthcare administration. Every major field of study includes specializations which allow students to customize their coursework to a specific concentration.

CSU-Global's classes begin every four weeks.

Students can earn their degree 100-percent online and on their own schedule. CSU-Global offers classes in an asynchronous format and students can access coursework any day or time.

U.S News & World Report ranked Colorado State University-Global Campus #7 in its list of Best Online Bachelor's Programs.

Colorado State University-Global Campus holds accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission.

15

University of Central Florida



(Orlando, FL)

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The University of Central Florida (UCF), a public, space-grant, research university founded in 1963, offers more than 200 degree programs through 24 colleges and satellite campuses.

A member of the State University System of Florida, UCF enrolls more than 60,000 students worldwide and boasts an alumni network of 230,000. The university has students from 50 states and more than 140 countries. UCF is the nation's second-largest university.

The University of Central Florida's degree offerings include a host of online programs leading to a variety of bachelor's and master's degrees.

The university offers bachelor degree completion programs for students who hold an associate's degree or have comparable transfer credits. The bachelor's degree completion programs include anthropology, Latin American studies, nursing, and

criminal justice. Some programs require students to complete internships, clinical experiences, or a practicum.

The university also offers more than 20 master's degree programs, such as English, educational leadership, digital forensics, and more. The university requires students enrolled in dissertation or thesis to present their final defenses on campus.

Online students have access to the university's library resources.

The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education recognizes the University of Central Florida as a research university with very high research activity.

U.S. News & World Report ranked the University of Central Florida #173 in National Universities in its 2015 edition of Best Colleges and #416 among Best Global Universities. The magazine also ranked the university #98 overall in its list of Best Education Schools.

Forbes ranked the University of Central Florida #153 in Research Universities, while *Princeton Review* included the university in the 2015 Best 379 Colleges list.

The respected Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business provides accreditation to the University of Central Florida's College of Business Administration. The University of Central Florida also holds accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.



(Lynchburg, VA)

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Liberty University is a private, non-profit Christian university that has been training Champions for Christ since 1971, and pioneering distance education since 1985.

Liberty University, the largest private, non-profit university in the United States and the largest Christian university in the world, enrolls more than 110,000 students on campus and online. Liberty University offers about 250 online programs leading to undergraduate and graduate (including doctoral) degrees in a variety of topics.

Liberty University Online offers eight-week online courses, taught from a Christian worldview. Liberty University Online allows students to earn a host of associate and bachelor degrees fully online in topics such as accounting, early childhood education, paralegal studies, aeronautics, and business.

Students also can pursue dozens of master's degree programs ranging from business to counseling to Christian ministry, as well as doctoral programs in business, counseling, education, seminary, and nursing. Some of the master's and doctoral courses require one-week to two-week on-campus intensives. Students should check the program before enrolling.

Students can access course materials when it's convenient for them, but they must meet set deadlines for coursework.

U.S. News & World Report ranked Liberty University #80 in its 2015 edition of Best Colleges in Regional Universities (South).

Liberty University holds accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges.

17 Robert Morris University, RMU Online



(Pittsburgh, PA)

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Robert Morris University, a private, co-educational university founded in 1921, enrolls more than 5,000 students. Robert Morris University, distinct from the similarly named school in Illinois, offers more than 80 programs leading to bachelor, master, and doctoral degrees through five academic schools. The university emphasis engaged learning.

Robert Morris University offers fully online degrees through RMU Online. The same faculty design and teach on-campus and online courses.

RMU Online's degree offerings include eight undergraduate programs such as cyber forensics info security, nursing, and organizational leadership, as well as more than a dozen graduate programs such as engineering management, instructional leadership, nursing, and higher education.

Students also can pursue a variety of undergraduate and graduate certificates ranging from English as a second language to nutrition.

The university offers six start dates each year and offers classes in an eight-week format. Most of RMU Online's classes are asynchronous but some may have synchronous elements.

RMU Online students have access to career services, tech help, and a student services representative.

U.S. *News & World Report* ranked Robert Morris University #96 in Regional Universities (North) in its 2015 edition of Best Colleges.

The respected Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business provides accreditation to Robert Morris University's School of Business. Robert Morris University also holds accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools.

18 **University of Alabama at Birmingham,**
UAB Online



(Birmingham, AL)

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The University of Alabama at Birmingham, a public university founded in 1969, enrolls more than 18,500 students worldwide. A member of the University of Alabama System, the University of Alabama at Birmingham consists of 12 academic divisions offering 140 programs of study leading to a variety of undergraduate, graduate (including doctoral), and professional degrees.

The UAB Health System, one of the nation's largest academic medical centers, has an affiliation with the university.

Through UAB Online, the University of Alabama at Birmingham offers a host of fully online programs, as well as distance accessible and blended programs.

UAB Online's online programs include seven bachelor's degrees in health care management and business topics such as marketing and finance, as well as nearly 20 master's degrees such as sociology, elementary education, and civil structural engineering. Students also can complete a handful of doctoral programs in education

topics through UAB Online.

Online students have access to 24/7 technical support and library resources.

Students can complete most online courses 100-percent online, but some instructors do require an orientation, on-campus presentations, or proctored exams. Students should check with the university if on-campus visits are not possible due to distance.

The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education recognizes the University of Alabama-Birmingham as a research university with very high research activity.

U.S. News & World Report ranked the University of Alabama-Birmingham #149 in National Universities in its 2015 edition of Best Colleges and #143 in Best Education Schools. The university also tied for #182 in the magazine's list of Best Global Universities.

Forbes ranked the University of Alabama-Birmingham #196 in Research Universities, while *Princeton Review* included the university in its 2015 list of Best 379 Colleges.

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools provides University of Alabama-Birmingham with accreditation. The respected Association to Advance College Schools of Business also provides accreditation to University of Alabama-Birmingham's Collat School of Business.

19

University of Minnesota Crookston



(Crookston, MN)

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The University of Minnesota Crookston, a public baccalaureate university established in 1966, enrolls nearly 2,000 students from around the world. A member of the University of Minnesota system, the University of Minnesota Crookston offers about 30 undergraduate degree programs through four academic departments: Business; Liberal Arts and Education; Agriculture and Natural Resources; and Math, Science, and Technology.

The university has created niches in technical, scientific, and professional fields. The school's most popular programs include business and natural resources.

The University of Minnesota Crookston offers more than a dozen fully online bachelor's degree programs, such as accounting, communication, and quality management. Students also can pursue a handful of minors and certificates.

The University of Minnesota Crookston offers classes on a semester basis with three start dates each year: spring, summer, and fall.

Online students have access to course materials 24/7, as well as library resources.

U.S. News & World Report ranked the University of Minnesota Crookston #40 among Regional Colleges (Midwest) in the 2015 edition of Best Colleges.

The University of Minnesota Crookston holds accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission.

20 Northern Arizona University, NAU-Extended Campuses



(Flagstaff, AZ)

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Northern Arizona University, a public university founded in 1899, offers nearly 150 programs leading to bachelor, master, and doctoral degrees through its main campus, as well as dozens of satellite campuses. Northern Arizona University enrolls more than 27,700 students.

Northern Arizona University offers a host of online classes and programs through NAU-Extended Campuses. Students can pursue a variety of bachelor's degree programs such as criminal justice, respiratory care, and parks and recreation management; 20 master's

degrees ranging from administration to nursing to educational leadership; or a doctorate in nursing practice. Online students also can complete a host of minors and certificates.

NAU-Extended Campuses offers most courses in an asynchronous format, allowing students to complete coursework on their schedule.

The university also offers Personalized Learning degree programs—self-paced, competency-based programs with no set schedules or classes. The university's Personalized Learning programs include bachelor degrees in computer information technology, liberal arts, and small business administration.

Online students have access to 24/7 technical support, tutoring, campus resources, and online library resources.

The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education recognizes Northern Arizona University as a research university with high research activity.

U.S. News & World Report ranked Northern Arizona University #104 in its list of Best Business Schools and #105 in its list of Best Education Schools in the 2015 edition of Best Colleges. *Forbes* ranked Northern Arizona University #202 in Research Universities.

Northern Arizona University holds accreditation from the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. The respected Association to Advance College Schools of Business also provides accreditation to Northern Arizona University's W.A. Franke College of Business.

21 **Florida Institute of Technology, Florida
Tech University Online**



(Melbourne, FL)

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Florida Institute of Technology, a private doctoral/research university founded in 1958, offers programs through five academic divisions with emphases on engineering, technology, science, and mathematics.

Florida Institute of Technology—commonly known as Florida Tech—enrolls about 16,000 students and boasts more than 60,000 alumni. Florida Tech has graduate and undergraduate students from all 50 states and from over 100 countries.

Florida Tech has trained many NASA scientists and astronauts. The school also operates an array of science-focused research centers and institutes.

Florida Tech University Online offers a host of undergraduate and graduate degree programs, which students can complete 100-percent online.

The university's undergraduate offerings include eight associate's degrees in topics such as accounting, healthcare management, and computer information systems; and more than a dozen bachelor's degrees, including applied psychology, aviation management, and criminal justice.

Students also can pursue 11 master of business administration degrees and six master's degrees in information technology, supply chain management, and information assurance and cybersecurity.

Florida Tech offers classes in eight-week terms. Students can complete coursework on their own schedule by set deadlines.

The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education includes Florida Institute of Technology in its list of Doctoral/Research Universities.

U.S. News & World Report ranked Florida Institute of Technology #173 in National Universities in its 2015 edition of Best Colleges.

Florida Institute of Technology ranked #200 among the *Times Higher Education's* World University Rankings 2014–2015. In addition, *Forbes* ranked Florida Institute of Technology #159 in Research Universities.

Florida Institute of Technology holds accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges.



(Grand Forks, ND)

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The University of North Dakota, a public research university established in 1883, enrolls nearly 15,000 students across 10 academic divisions. The University of North Dakota, the largest and oldest university in the state, offers more than 220 programs of study leading to a variety of undergraduate and graduate (including doctoral) degrees, as well as professional degrees in medicine and law.

The University of North Dakota specializes in areas such as aerospace, energy and environmental protection, engineering research, health sciences, and nutrition.

The University of North Dakota Online & Distance Education offers 10 online bachelor's degrees such as civil engineering, communication, and psychology, as well as an accelerated Bachelor of Science in Nursing program for those who already holds a bachelor's degree in another field.

Online students also can complete nearly 20 master's degree programs such as aviation, elementary education, and space studies; and two doctoral programs in nursing. University of North Dakota also offers more than a dozen online graduate certificate programs.

The university's online courses feature the same curriculum, lectures, and deadlines as their on-campus counterparts.

University of North Dakota offers students two types of courses: self-paced, independent study, which allow students to enroll at any time and take up to nine months to complete each course; and semester-based courses, which follow the university's standard schedule.

The Carnegie Classifications of Institutions of Higher Education recognizes the University of North Dakota as a research university with high research activity. The campus has several research institutions, including the Energy and Environmental Research Center, the School of Medicine and Health Sciences, and the USDA Human Nutrition Center. The university also has the John D. Odegard School of Aerospace.

U.S. News & World Report ranked the University of North Dakota #168 in its 2015 edition of Best Colleges in National Universities.

Forbes ranked the University of North Dakota #179 in Research Universities, and *Princeton Review* included the university in its 2015 list of Best 379 Colleges.

The University of North Dakota holds accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission. The respected Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business provides accreditation to the University of North Dakota's College of Business and Public Administration.



(Boca Raton, FL)

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Everglades University, a private college established in 1998, enrolls nearly 700 students. A small, not-profit college, Everglades offers nearly a dozen programs leading to bachelor and master degrees.

The school's mission includes providing quality education to adult learners of diverse backgrounds in a collaborative environment where every student has the opportunity to achieve personal growth.

Everglades University's offerings include online programs leading to bachelor's degrees in alternative medicine, aviation, and more; as well as a handful of master's degrees in business administration, aviation science, entrepreneurship, and public health administration.

Students also can customize their degrees with a variety of concentrations.

Everglades University offers small class sizes, and online students earn the same degree as their on-campus counterparts.

Everglades University is a member of numerous prestigious associations and societies.

U.S. News & World Report ranked Everglades University #70 in Regional Colleges (South) in its 2015 edition of Best Colleges.

The Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools provides Everglades University with accreditation.

24 University of Illinois Springfield



(Springfield, IL)

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The University of Illinois Springfield, a public university established in 1969, enrolls about 5,700 students. A member of the University of Illinois System, the University of Illinois Springfield offers roughly 40 undergraduate and graduate degree programs, as well as a doctorate in public administration.

The University of Illinois Springfield offers a dozen online bachelor's degrees, ranging from English to computer science information systems security to mathematics, as well

as 11 online master's degrees such as public administration, environmental sciences, and teacher leadership.

Online students can also complete several minors and a variety of certificate programs.

The same faculty teach the fully online, blended, and on-campus courses. The online students have access to tutoring and career services.

U.S. News & World Report ranked the University of Illinois Springfield #36 in Regional Universities (Midwest) in its 2015 edition of Best Colleges.

The University of Illinois Springfield holds accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business also provides accreditation to the University of Illinois Springfield's College of Business and Management.

25 Western Kentucky University



(Bowling Green, KY)

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Western Kentucky University, a public university founded in 1906, enrolls about 21,000 students in more than 100 programs leading to a variety of undergraduate and graduate (including doctoral) degrees. Western Kentucky University consists of six undergraduate colleges and the Office of Graduate Studies and Research.

Western Kentucky University's degree offerings include more than 80 online programs and certificates. Online students can complete associate's degrees in early childhood education, interdisciplinary studies, and water resource management, as well as six bachelor's degrees such as family and consumer sciences, organizational leadership, and sociology.

The university also offers bachelor degree completion programs in management, dental hygiene, technology management, and systems management, as well as a degree in environmental health sciences, which requires some on-campus time. Western Kentucky University's online students can also pursue more than two dozen master's degree in topics such as criminology, education, biology, and athletic training.

Students have access to online tutoring, academic advising, library resources, and career services.

U.S. News & World Report ranked Western Kentucky University #31 in Regional Universities (South) in the 2015 edition of Best Colleges and #176 in its list of Best Education Schools.

Western Kentucky University holds accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. The respected Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business also provides accreditation to Western Kentucky University's Gordon Ford College of Business.



(Denver, CO)

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Regis University, a private, co-educational, Roman Catholic university founded in 1877, enrolls nearly 10,000 students in a variety of undergraduate and graduate degree programs. A member of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities, Regis University consists of three colleges: Regis College, the College for Professional Studies, and the Rueckert-Hartman College for Health Professions.

Regis University's degree offerings include more than two dozen undergraduate programs, such as computer networking, social science, and health care administration, as well as a bachelor's completion program in nursing; and about 30 graduate programs in topics including information assurance, business, education, nursing, and health services administration. Students can also pursue a host of certificate options.

Regis University offers students the flexibility to complete coursework on their own schedule.

U.S. News & World Report ranked Regis University #29 in Regional Universities (West) in

the 2015 edition of Best Colleges.

Regis University received accreditation from the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools.

27

Missouri State University



(Springfield, MO)

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Missouri State University, a public university founded in 1906, enrolls more than 22,300 students worldwide. A member of the Missouri State University System, Missouri State University consists of nine academic divisions offering nearly 200 undergraduate and graduate degree programs.

Missouri State University offers 10 online undergraduate degree completion programs such as communication studies, information technology, and hospitality and restaurant administration; 12 master's degree programs such as history, business administration, and education; and a doctor of nursing practice degree.

Online students also can complete several minors and certificate programs. Missouri State University's online programs follow an asynchronous format allowing students flexibility to complete coursework on their own schedule.

U.S. News & World Report ranked Missouri State University #67 in Regional Universities (Midwest) in the 2015 edition of Best Colleges.

Missouri State University received accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission. The respected Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business also provides accreditation to Missouri State University's College of Business Administration.

28 New Mexico State University



(Las Cruces, NM)

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New Mexico State University, a public, land-grant, research university founded in 1888, enrolls about 18,400 students. New Mexico State University, a NASA Space Grant

College, offers a host of undergraduate and graduate programs through its seven colleges and graduate school.

New Mexico State University's online offerings include bachelor degree completion programs, master's degrees, and doctorates.

Students who completed two years of college coursework can pursue seven bachelor completion programs, including sociology, criminal justice, and elementary education.

Online students can earn 18 master's degrees ranging from education to engineering, as well as doctorates in educational leadership, curriculum and instruction, and nursing.

Online students can also earn a variety of certificate programs. Some degree programs require on-campus elements; students should check the program before enrolling.

The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education recognizes New Mexico State University as a research university with high research activity.

U.S. News & World Report ranked New Mexico State University #116 among Best Education Schools in its 2015 edition of Best Colleges. In addition, *Forbes* ranked New Mexico State University #165 in Research Universities.

New Mexico State University holds accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission. The respected Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business also provides accreditation to New Mexico State University's College of Business.



(Hays, KS)

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Fort Hays State University, a public, co-educational university founded in 1902, enrolls about 11,200 students across four colleges. Fort Hays State University, governed by the Kansas Board of Regents, offers about 80 majors leading to undergraduate and graduate degrees.

Fort Hays State University offers 40 online degrees through its Virtual College. Often the same faculty teach the online and on-campus courses.

Virtual College students can complete associate's degrees in general studies and applied technology, as well as two dozen bachelor's degrees ranging from business education to information networking to medical diagnostic imaging.

Students also can pursue master's degrees in areas such as health and human performance, liberal studies, and special education. Fort Hays State University's Virtual College also offers three specialist of education programs and a variety of certificate programs.

Students can earn most degrees completely online, but some degrees do require on-

campus courses.

Fort Hays State University received accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission.

30 University of Louisiana at Monroe



(Monroe, LA)

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The University of Louisiana at Monroe, a public, co-educational university established in 1931, offers a variety of undergraduate and graduate degrees. A member of the University of Louisiana System, the University of Louisiana at Monroe enrolls about 8,500 students.

The University of Louisiana at Monroe's course offerings include dozens of online degree programs, including an associate's degree in general studies and nearly 20 bachelor's degrees ranging from elementary education to history to psychology.

Online students also can pursue master's degrees in criminal justice, gerontology, English, and more; as well as a handful of doctoral degrees in education and philosophy.

The University of Louisiana at Monroe offers courses in four-, eight-, or 16-week formats depending on the program and the semester.

U.S. *News & World Report* ranked University of Louisiana at Monroe #81 in Regional Universities (South) in the 2015 edition of Best Colleges.

The University of Louisiana at Monroe holds accreditation from the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The respected Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business also provides accreditation to the University of Louisiana at Monroe's College of Business and Social Sciences.

31 Lewis University



(Romeoville, IL)

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Lewis University, a private, Roman Catholic university founded in 1932, offers more than 100 programs of study leading to undergraduate and graduate degrees through five colleges and schools. Lewis University enrolls about 6,800 students.

Lewis University offers a variety of online classes, as well as a host of online degree programs.

Online offerings include bachelor degrees in business administration, information security and risk management, information technology management, and professional studies. The university offers some programs in an accelerated format.

Lewis University also offers seven online master's degrees, such as aviation and transportation, business analytics, and organizational leadership; and a doctor of nursing practice degree.

U.S. News & World Report ranked Lewis University #23 in Regional Universities (Midwest) in the 2015 edition of Best Colleges. The Higher Learning Commission provides Lewis University with accreditation.

32 Huntington University



(Huntington, IN)

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Huntington University, a private university affiliated with the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, enrolls about 1,200 students in more than 70 academic programs leading to undergraduate and graduate degrees. Founded in 1897, Huntington University is a member of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities.

Huntington University's degree offerings include undergraduate degrees in eight topics, such as organizational management, social work, and criminal justice, as well as master's degrees in global initiatives, pastoral leadership, and global youth leadership.

Huntington University offers online classes in an accelerated format, with classes held one night a week for five weeks. Students do not need to log in at specific times.

U.S. News & World Report ranked Huntington University #14 in Regional Colleges (Midwest) in the 2015 edition of Best Colleges. Huntington University received accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission.

33

University of Southern Mississippi



The University of Southern Mississippi, a public research university established in 1910, enrolls about 15,300 students from around the world. The University of Southern Mississippi offers nearly 200 programs leading to undergraduate, graduate (including doctoral), and specialist degrees. The university has a major polymer science research center and a strong fine arts program.

The University of Southern Mississippi's degree offerings include more than two dozen degree programs, which students can complete fully online. Online degrees include eight bachelor's degree programs, such as applied technology, elementary education, and nursing; and 17 master's degrees, such as human performance, logistics, trade and transportation, and nutrition and food systems.

Online students have the flexibility to complete coursework on their own schedule.

The University of Southern Mississippi received accreditation from the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The respected Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business also provides accreditation to University of Southern Mississippi's College of Business.



(Marion, IN)

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Indiana Wesleyan University, a private, liberal arts, evangelical Christian university founded in 1920, enrolls about 15,800 students across five academic units. A member of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities and affiliated with the Wesleyan Church denomination, Indiana Wesleyan University offers a variety programs leading to undergraduate and graduate (including doctoral) degrees.

Indiana Wesleyan University's degree offerings include more than 80 programs students can complete online.

Online students can pursue nine associate's degrees, such as accounting and paralegal studies; and 15 bachelor's degrees, such as Biblical studies and social work. Students also can earn nearly 40 online master's degrees such as divinity, nursing education, and organizational leadership; and doctorates in nursing practice, organizational leadership, and occupational therapy.

Online students earn the same degree as their on-campus counterparts. Indiana Wesleyan University offers courses in an asynchronous format. Online students have access to academic advisers and library resources.

U.S. News & World Report ranked Indiana Wesleyan University #26 in Regional Universities (Midwest) in the 2015 edition of Best Colleges. The Higher Learning Commission provides Indiana Wesleyan University with accreditation.

35 California Baptist University, CBU Online



(Riverside, CA)

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California Baptist University, a private, liberal arts, Christian university founded in 1950, enrolls nearly 8,000 students. Affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, California Baptist University offers a variety of undergraduate and graduate degrees through 11 academic divisions. California Baptist University has educational partnerships with universities in Europe and Asia.

Through CBU Online, California Baptist University offers nearly 40 online degree programs in an accelerated format. California Baptist University's online programs, geared toward adult learners, allow students the flexibility to complete coursework on

their schedule.

Online degree options include bachelor's degrees in Christian ministries, criminal justice, and interdisciplinary studies; as well as master's degrees in public administration, communication, and disability studies.

Online students have access to resources including academic advisers and career services.

U.S. News & World Report ranked California Baptist University #38 in Regional Universities (West) in the 2015 edition of Best Colleges. The Western Association of Schools and Colleges provides accreditation to California Baptist University.

36 Regent University, Regent Online



(Virginia Beach, VA)

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Regent University, a private, co-educational, Christian university founded in 1978, enrolls nearly 6,000 students. Regent University offers a variety of undergraduate and graduate

(including doctoral) degrees through eight academic schools. Regent University has educated students from more than 100 countries.

Regent University offers more than 60 online degree programs through Regent Online, including associate's degrees in business and Christian studies and bachelor's degrees in accounting, communication, leadership studies, and more. Online students can also pursue a host of master's degrees ranging from education to counseling to theater; and two dozen doctoral programs, such as counselor education, ministry, and communication.

Some graduate programs require weekend or week-long residencies. The same professors teach the online and on-campus courses. Regent Online students have access to 24/7 tech support.

The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education recognizes Regent University as a Doctoral/Research University. Regent University received accreditation from the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

37 Upper Iowa University



Upper Iowa University, a private university established in 1857, enrolls more than 6,100 students. Upper Iowa University offers more than 40 undergraduate and graduate degree programs ranging from art to information technology.

Upper Iowa University's online degree offerings include a host of undergraduate and graduate degree programs, as well as a variety of certificate programs.

Online students can pursue associate's degrees in criminal justice, general business, liberal arts, and psychology, as well as more than 20 bachelor's degrees in nursing, public administration, communication, and more. Online students can also earn master's degrees in business administration, education, higher education administration, and public administration.

The university offers courses in an asynchronous format, so students have the flexibility to complete coursework on their own schedule.

Upper Iowa University offers six eight-week terms each year. Students also can choose from several self-paced degree programs.

U.S. News & World Report ranked Upper Iowa University #109 in Regional Universities (Midwest) in its 2015 edition of Best Colleges. Upper Iowa University received accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission.



(Burlington, VT)

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Champlain College, a private, co-educational college founded in 1878, offers a variety of undergraduate and graduate degree programs in more than 80 academic topics. Champlain College enrolls 2,000 students from around the world. The school's "Upside Down Curriculum" allows traditional undergraduates to take in-depth classes in their major beginning in the first semester.

Champlain College's offerings include a host of online degrees, such as bachelor's degrees in computer forensics, health care administration, and software development; and master's degrees in early childhood education, digital forensic science, law, and more.

Champlain College offers classes in seven-week sessions. Students can earn their degree 100-percent online.

Champlain College's asynchronous course format allows students to access coursework any day or time.

U.S. News & World Report ranked Champlain College #14 in Regional Colleges (North) in its 2015 edition of Best Colleges. In addition, *Princeton Review* included Champlain College in its 2015 list of Best 379 Colleges.

Champlain College received accreditation from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges through its Commission on Institutions of Higher Education.

39 **Dakota State University**



(Madison, SD)

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Dakota State University, a public university founded in 1881, enrolls more than 3,000 students. Governed by the South Dakota Board of Regents, Dakota State University offers a variety of undergraduate and graduate (including doctoral) degree programs through three colleges.

Dakota State University's degree offerings include more than a dozen online bachelor's

degrees, such as accounting, cyber operations, and marketing; and seven master's degrees, such as health informatics, analytics, and more. Dakota State University specializes in computer management, computer information systems, and other related undergraduate and graduate programs. Online students also can earn doctorates in cyber security and information systems.

Online students have access to library resources and a bookstore. The same professors teach the on-campus and online courses. The university also offers the online courses at the same time as the on-campus classes, which allows for student collaboration.

U.S. News & World Report ranked Dakota State University #80 in Regional Universities (Midwest) in the 2015 edition of Best Colleges. Dakota State University received accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission.

40

University of Memphis, UM Online



(Memphis, TN)

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The University of Memphis, a public research university founded in 1912, enrolls more than 21,000 students from all over the world. The flagship of the Tennessee Board of Regents system, the University of Memphis offers a variety of undergraduate and graduate degrees.

Through UM Online, the University of Memphis offers dozens of online degree programs. UM Online's offerings include 16 bachelor's degrees ranging from African-American studies to communication to accounting; and 18 master's degrees such as history, educational psychology, and public health. UM Online students also can pursue a doctorate in higher and adult education, as well as a variety of certificates.

UM Online students earn the same degree as the university's on-campus students. Online students also have access to library services, career services, and disability resources.

The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education recognizes University of Memphis as a research university with high research activity.

U.S. News & World Report ranked the University of Memphis #172 among Best Education Schools in its 2015 edition of Best Colleges. In addition, *Forbes* ranked the University of Memphis #236 in Research Universities.

The University of Memphis holds accreditation from the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The respected Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business provides accreditation to the University of Memphis's Fogelman College of Business and Economics.



(Beaumont, TX)

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Lamar University, a public, co-educational, research university founded in 1923, awards a variety of bachelor, master, and doctoral degrees through five academic colleges. A member of the Texas State University System, Lamar University enrolls nearly 15,000 students.

Lamar University's offerings include nearly 30 online programs leading to a variety of bachelor and master degrees in topics such as computer science, criminal justice, and more. Students also can pursue an online doctorate in educational leadership or a handful of professional programs.

Lamar University offers courses in traditional 15-week sessions, as well as accelerated eight-week sessions. Students also can choose from multiple start dates each year.

The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education recognizes Lamar University as a Doctoral/Research University.

Forbes ranked Lamar University #231 in Research Universities.

Lamar University received accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The respected Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business also provides accreditation to Lamar University's College of Business.

42 Florida International University



(Miami, FL)

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Florida International University, a public research university founded in 1965, enrolls more than 50,000 students. A member of the State University System of Florida, Florida International University offers more than 191 programs of study leading to undergraduate, graduate (including doctoral), and professional degrees through 23 schools and colleges.

Florida International University's offerings include a variety of online bachelor degree programs, such as business administration, early childhood education, and recreation therapy; and more than a dozen master's degrees, such as construction management, music education, and real estate. Students also can take courses toward professional

certification and personal enrichment.

Online students have access to an online orientation, success coaches, and the Academy of Leaders.

The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education recognizes Florida International University as a research university with high research activity.

Florida International University tied for #458 in *U.S. News & World Report's* 2015 listing of Best Global Universities. *Forbes* ranked Florida International University #198 in Research Universities.

Florida International University's Landon Undergraduate School of Business ranked #110 in *Bloomberg Business's* 2014 list of Undergraduate Business School Programs.

Florida International University holds accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The respected Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business also provides accreditation to Florida International University's College of Business.

43

East Carolina University



(Greenville, NC)

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East Carolina University, a public, co-educational, doctoral/research university founded in 1907, enrolls about 27,300 students. Among the largest universities in North Carolina, East Carolina University awards a variety of bachelor, master, doctoral, and professional degrees through 14 colleges and schools.

Students who hold some college credit can enroll in a bachelor-degree completion program in 16 topics, including education, management information systems, and industrial technology. Online students also can pursue 21 master's degrees in areas such as criminal justice, library science, and nursing.

East Carolina University offers a host of online programs, taught by the same faculty as on-campus courses. Online students can customize their degrees with a variety of concentrations. Online students have access to course materials any time or day, although some classes may have real-time elements.

The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education recognizes East Carolina University as a Doctoral/Research University.

U.S. News & World Report ranked East Carolina University #181 among Best Education Schools in its 2015 edition of Best Colleges. *Forbes* ranked East Carolina University #190 in Research Universities.

East Carolina University received accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business also provides accreditation to East Carolina University College of Business.

44 Nova Southeastern University



(Fort Lauderdale, FL)

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Nova Southeastern University, a private, nonsectarian, non-profit, research university founded in 1964, enrolls about 28,400 students across 18 schools and colleges.

Nova Southeastern University offers more than 175 programs leading to a variety of undergraduate, graduate, and professional degrees and boasts more than 145,000 alumni.

Nova Southeastern University offers a host of online programs leading to bachelor's degrees, such as speech, language, and communication disorders, recreational therapy, and nursing; master's degrees, including accounting, coastal zone management, and gerontology; and doctoral programs in clinical psychology, education, family therapy, and more.

Nova Southeastern University's online programs feature real-time electronic classrooms.

The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education recognizes Nova Southeastern University as a research university with high research activity.

Forbes ranked Nova Southeastern University #209 in Research Universities.

Nova Southeastern University received accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

45 Brenau University



(Gainesville, GA)

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Brenau University, a private, non-profit university founded in 1878, enrolls about 2,800 students across several campuses.

Brenau University offers a variety of undergraduate and graduate (including doctoral) degree programs. The Brenau Women's College is the cornerstone of the University.

Brenau University offers 16 online programs leading to bachelor and master's degrees in topics such as education, business administration, fine arts, and more.

Students can earn their degree 100-percent online. Online students must "attend" class five to seven days each week. Online students have access to tutoring, counseling, and career services.

U.S. News & World Report ranked Brenau University #43 in Regional Universities (South) in the 2015 edition of Best Colleges.

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools provides Brenau University with accreditation.

46 Saint Leo University Online



Saint Leo University, a non-profit, private, Roman Catholic, liberal arts university established in 1889, enrolls more than 15,900 students. Saint Leo University awards a variety of undergraduate and graduate degrees. Saint Leo University serves students of all faiths.

Saint Leo University Online offers a host of associate's, bachelor's, and master's degrees which students can earn 100-percent online. The degrees are the same as those earned by traditional on-campus students.

Saint Leo University Online's offerings include associate's degrees in business administration, criminal justice, information technology, and liberal arts, as well as 16 bachelor's degrees in health care management, religion, and more. Students also can complete a handful of undergraduate minors.

Online students also can pursue more than two dozen master's degrees in topics such as business, education, criminal justice, and theology. Students also can earn a doctorate of business administration online, although the university requires three one-week on-campus seminars.

The university offers six eight-week terms each year.

U.S. News & World Report ranked Saint Leo University #65 in Regional Universities (South) in the 2015 edition of Best Colleges. Saint Leo University holds accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.



(Gaffney, SC)

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Limestone College, a private, co-educational liberal arts college established in 1845, enrolls more than 3,500 students. A non-denominational Christian college, Limestone College awards a variety of associate's, bachelor's, and master's degrees.

Limestone College's degree offerings include a host of online undergraduate degrees in topics such as business administration, computer science, and liberal arts. Online students also can pursue a master of business administration degree.

Limestone College offers classes in eight-week terms with six terms each year.

U.S. News & World Report ranked Limestone College #64 among Regional Colleges (South) in its 2015 edition of Best Colleges.

Limestone College received accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.



(Kennesaw, GA)

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Kennesaw State University, a public, co-educational university founded in 1963, enrolls more than 42,600 students. Part of the University System of Georgia, Kennesaw State University offers a variety of bachelor, master, and doctoral degree programs.

Kennesaw State University's offerings include bachelor's degrees in topics such as sociology, fashion design, marketing, and more. Some bachelor degree programs require students to hold an associate's degree in a related field before enrollment.

Students also can complete more than a dozen online master's degree programs, such as engineering and education, as well as a doctorate in teacher leadership. The university also offers a host of online minors, certification programs, and endorsements.

Kennesaw State University faculty design and teach the online courses, which allow students to learn at their own pace. Online students have access to tutoring, academic

advisers, a bookstore, library resources, and tech support.

U.S. News & World Report ranked Kennesaw State University #70 among Regional Universities (South) in its 2015 edition of Best Colleges.

Kennesaw State University holds accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The respected Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business also provides accreditation to Kennesaw State University Coles College of Business.

49 Old Dominion University



(Norfolk, VA)

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Old Dominion University, a public, space-grant and sea-grant research university established in 1930, offers more than 160 programs of study leading to a variety of undergraduate and graduate degrees. Old Dominion University enrolls more than 24,000 students and boasts 124,000 alumni worldwide.

Old Dominion University's offerings include dozens of online bachelor degrees in topics such as nursing, marketing, and communication; as well as master's degrees in aerospace engineering, dental hygiene, educational leadership, and more.

Online students also can complete several online doctoral programs, including community college leadership, nurse executive, and occupational and technical studies.

The university also offers a host of online minors, certificates, and licensure programs. Old Dominion students can complete most coursework at their own pace, but some classes may require real-time participation.

The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education recognizes Old Dominion University as a research university with high research activity.

U.S. News & World Report ranked Old Dominion University #70 among Best Education Schools. *Forbes* ranked Old Dominion University #191 in Research Universities.

Old Dominion University holds accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The respected Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business also provides accreditation to Old Dominion University's Strome College of Business.



(Saint Paul, MN)

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Concordia University-Saint Paul, a private liberal arts university founded in 1893, enrolls about 4,000 students in a variety of undergraduate, graduate, and certificate programs. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod operates Concordia University-Saint Paul, an affiliate of the Concordia University System.

Concordia University-Saint Paul's degree offerings include more than 20 undergraduate programs in topics such as early childhood education, family science, and organizational management and leadership.

Online students also can pursue a host of master's degrees, such as criminal justice leadership and health care management; as well as a doctor of physical therapy degree.

Concordia University-Saint Paul offers courses in an accelerated format, which gives students the flexibility to earn their degree on their own schedule.

U.S. News & World Report ranked Concordia University-Saint Paul #106 among Regional Universities in its 2015 edition of Best Colleges. Concordia University holds accreditation

from the Higher Learning Commission.

* * *

The Savvy Student's Guide to Online Colleges and Online Education



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Introduction

Online colleges and online education now occupy an increasingly large portion of the

academic landscape. Yet just two decades ago, the idea of a virtual classroom was a high-tech novelty. The idea that online education could ever replace the traditional classroom would have seemed exaggerated, even far-fetched. The World Wide Web (as it was cumbersome known at the time) was in its infancy. We were only beginning to imagine its potential to impact our lives, let alone the transformative effect it would have on our education.

Today, the Internet presents a world of opportunities that have completely transformed the state of modern education from the way we learn, study, and test to the way we engage information, assignments, and each other. Thus, where online education once satisfied a niche population of students and invoked scrutiny for its questionable academic rigor, the accountability of its assessments, and the quality of the overall experience, it is today both an inextricable part of the broader educational sector and a massive private industry.

Though both of these facts betoken the rapid proliferation and market penetration of online colleges (and online education more generally), they also suggest a dual socioeconomic development. On the one hand, we have witnessed a remarkable growth in the credibility and perceived normalcy of online education, to the extent that today even the most vaunted and respected academic institutions incorporate some degree of online education into their broader set of course offerings. This has helped to undergird the perceived value of online colleges and to impose a level of accountability on its practitioners. In turn, employers and members of the general public have come to view online education with increasingly less suspicion.

On the other hand, the growth of online colleges has contributed to the expansion of a for-profit institutions in which education may be marketed as an internet commodity. The result is a significant sector within education consisting of institutions still to some degree trying to define their academic credibility or accountability, but with considerable marketing and recruitment resources. More traditional non-profit colleges only recently delving into online education thus find themselves in competition with more established for-profit online colleges. The latter have been doing online education for two decades and have considerable connections in industry and the corporate world, providing continuing education for companies that might otherwise have sought more traditional schools to advance their employees' knowledge and skills.

Like any industry emerging from two decades of solid growth, online education exists across a spectrum of highly variable quality, credibility, and accessibility. Moreover, within this spectrum, the compatibility between a student and a given online college will also vary considerably. For those seeking an online education, finding the right institution and subsequently getting the most out of this institution can be challenging. There is a dense morass of marketing material, rankings, and course offerings through which every potential applicant must wade.



The objective of this guide is to provide a life raft as potential applicants venture deeper into the online college waters. The following discussion aims to assist prospective online students as they navigate a marketplace that continues to grow and diversify. We offer a brief history of distance education, both before and after the advent of in-home web usage; a discussion of the benefits of attending college online; and a consideration of the potential drawbacks that online applicants must consider. The discussion will also include tips on how to initiate a search for the online college that's right for you; how to make an informed decision; how to get the most out of your time in online college; and, finally, how to make your online degree work for you in the real world.

The advice we offer here therefore supplements the ranking of 50 best online colleges for 2015–16 at the start of this article. Likewise, it supplements TheBestSchools.org's analysis of the 25 Best Online Degrees in today's job market as well as our breakdown of The Best Online College in Each of America's Fifty States. Use this Guide in coordination with any of our online college and degree ranking resources as you undertake your search for the right online college.

The History of Distance Education

Early History

Though the focus of this guide is online education, the origins of this educational approach actually date quite a bit further back in history than the proliferation or even

the invention of the Internet. In fact, online education falls under the larger umbrella concept of “distance education.” Distance education refers to the experience of receiving instruction as mediated by some mode of communication that transcends geographical space.

According to a 2005 article in *Distance Learning* magazine, this educational strategy did begin with an innovation, but it wasn't email. Long before the term “snail mail” had entered the popular vernacular, the innovation of standardized penny postage in the United Kingdom made distance education a reality.[1]

In 1840, English teacher Isaac Pitman put the Penny Post system to constructive use, offering shorthand writing instruction through mailed correspondence. What most differentiated Pitman's approach from prior attempts at correspondence education was the educator's own active feedback and assessment of completed work. This bilateral communication between remotely located educator and student would form the basis for distance education.[2]



In just three years, Pitman had parlayed his innovation into the Phonographic Correspondence Society and, thereafter, Sir Isaac Pitman's Correspondence Colleges.[3] Pitman's approach gained ground with educators throughout Europe as the nineteenth century wore on. According to *Distance Learning*, the late 1800s saw the emergence of several leading distance education institutions, including Edinburgh's Skerry's College in 1878, London's Correspondence College in 1887, and, in Sweden, the influential Hermod's, which was officially established in 1898.[4]

The strategy even gained ground in the United States before the turn of the century, with newly established institutions like the University of Chicago making correspondence education a major part of their educational arsenal as early as 1890.[5] Within the decade, major distance education institutions had emerged in Boston and eastern Pennsylvania as well.

Proliferation

As with online colleges today, early distance education was greeted with mixed feelings.

According to *Distance Learning*, correspondence education “was designed to provide educational opportunities for those who were not among the economic elite and who could not afford full time residence at an educational institution. Many saw it as simply a business operation, and viewed this alternative as inferior education. Moreover, these distance opportunities extended education potential to the masses, an extreme departure from the undemocratic educational system that characterized the early years of U.S. history.”[6]

Distance Learning posits that in spite of the reservations of its critics, distance learning spread thanks to a cultural push for more equal educational access in the U.S. In a similar way, this account will demonstrate that online colleges today are very much affected by the same mixed bag of support and criticism that impacted distance education in its earliest incarnations. That is, the desire for equal educational access continues to collide with questions of quality assurance all across the online college industry.[7]



Another common feature of distance education throughout its history is that technological innovation has often been the force to spark its evolution. With the proliferation of radio in the earliest 20th century, a number of the first regularly broadcast programs incorporated educational instruction coming from universities and other places of learning. In many developing nations, call-in educational programs remain an important channel for teaching otherwise remote, isolated, or impoverished populations.[8]

By the late 1930s, television was beginning to supplant radio as the preferred medium for broadcast correspondence education. According to *Distance Learning*, in 1951 Cleveland’s Western Reserve University became the first school to offer college credit courses through television broadcast. New York University, which adopted the approach, offered “Sunrise Semester” courses through a partnership with CBS from 1957 to 1982.[9]

Synchronous Distance Education

What most separates this earlier form of distance learning from its present online incarnation is asynchronicity. That is, traditional modes of distance learning have relied on correspondence with transmission inherently delayed or—to say it simply—out of sync. This means lapses of time necessarily interrupt the cycle of instruction, inquiry, response, assignment submission, assessment, and feedback. Though asynchronous distance learning historically overcame the physical limitations caused by spatial distances, the challenge of temporal lag or delay always limited its dynamism and appeal.

The first attempts at overcoming this obstacle took the form of two-way audio communication between students and educator, not much different from a multiperson telephone conference. By the end of the 20th century, media such as open broadcast cable and “interactive instructional TV” (ITV) would combine this audio communication with video. This approach to televised live lecturing became increasingly popular during the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, many early-adopting U.S. state governments employed ITV in order to establish statewide distance learning networks with considerable success.

Of course, all of these innovations would merely set the virtual stage for what the web has made possible. In the mid-1990s, as household web usage became increasingly standard, its synchronous, multilateral education capabilities began coming into focus. The web had made the immediate transmission of video, audio, graphical, and compositional content



considerably easier, more reliable, and more accessible. In 1996, Jones International University became the first online university in the United States to receive full accreditation, when it gained recognition through the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools.[10]

By the start of the new millennium, online colleges moved from the educational fringe to center stage as one of the fastest-growing forms of education in circulation. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, “from 2000 to 2008, the percentage of undergraduates enrolled in at least one distance education class expanded from 8 percent to 20 percent, and the percentage enrolled in a distance education degree

program increased from 2 percent to 4 percent.”[11]

Prevalence Today

Today, online education occupies a place of great importance in the grander scheme of higher education. In spite of concerns over the business imperatives that sometimes drive this educational sector (an issue discussed at length throughout this account) and in spite of some early skepticism over the instructional quality distance education can achieve, it is now clear the benefits of online education far exceed its drawbacks.

In an overview of distance learning, an associate professor and Director of Business Education from the University of West Georgia (2007) surmises that “Several changes have taken place in online education over the years. Online education has moved from a minor alternative role of ‘learning by correspondence’ to the center of life at most universities. The Internet has played a significant role in these changes because it has assisted instructors to more effectively respond to the limitations often cited regarding online education and it has been used to deliver instruction to students and employees at remote sites.”[12; references omitted]

As the benefits have become self-evident, so too has the prevalence of the online college industry. Universities and private enterprises alike have substantially increased their investment in online colleges over the last decade or more and have, in turn, enjoyed broader enrollment capacity and greater revenues.[13]



Both by way of traditional universities and for-profit corporations, online colleges have become a largely entrenched dimension of America’s broader educational strategy. An article in *EdTech Magazine* (2012) offers a set of statistics illustrating not only that online colleges are an important part of education, but also that web-mediated distance learning has

actually replaced the brick-and-mortar classroom experience for many students. For still other students, online education has forged and widened a previously non-existent learning space, one that makes higher education accessible to those who might otherwise remain disenfranchised.[14]

According to *EdTech Magazine*, 65 percent of students consulted in 2012 had taken some online classes. A nearly identical 64 percent of full-time faculty at community colleges taught through some form of online distance education.[15]

The *Magazine* goes on to report that 60 percent of four-year private schools and fully 90 percent of four-year public colleges offer online classes to their students. For two-year colleges, the number is 91 percent.[16]

Also, as of 2012, 58 percent of all colleges and universities offered degrees for which every bit of coursework could be completed online.[17] Statistics also reflect a shared and growing perception among students, faculty, and college administrators that online education is an essential part of the future of education and that the increased accessibility and flexibility that it facilitates is improving educational opportunities in far-reaching and profound ways.

U.S. News & World Report tells that 2012 marked a 10th consecutive year of growth for online colleges, with more than 6.7 million students having taken at least one online university course through the previous year.[18] Moreover, [Babson Research reported](#) that in 2013 this number exceeded 7 million. This represents a remarkable pace of growth from just 1.6 million students in 2002.[19]

Researchers say that online colleges reached their peak rate of growth in 2005 with a massive 36.5 percent increase in enrollment over the previous year. Growth has slowed substantially since then, with online colleges recording a 9.3 percent rate of growth over the previous year in late 2011. Researchers largely attribute this slowed pace to the fact that so much of the student population has already adopted online education. For this reason, a plateau in growth may be approaching eventually. Still, at this juncture, the new annual crop of college and post-graduate aspirants keeps the number of online students rising—a trend that is likely to continue into the foreseeable future.[20]

In the next section, we focus on the impact of these trends, noting the wide range of benefits conferred by the growth and entrenchment of online colleges.

The Benefits of an Online Education

The explosion in online college enrollment over the last decade makes perfect sense. Web-mediated education has opened up a world of opportunity to populations previously excluded and it has transformed the strategic landscape for traditional institutions of higher education. All told, its benefits are considerable and are likely only to grow more numerous and impactful as the technology, standards, and processes which channel online education are refined. Next, we consider some of the most compelling benefits of an online education:

Improved Flexibility

For many potential students, online colleges represent the one and only path to a formal higher education. Because the web-mediated nature of online colleges allows for instruction and interaction that is both synchronous (live online lectures, live chats, etc.) and asynchronous (lecture podcasts, bulletin boards, email exchanges), students have a better opportunity to balance personal or professional demands with academic responsibilities.

Consequently, online college is an attractive option for many students who must also work for a living. According to *EdTech Magazine*, 27 percent of distance learners in 2012 also maintained full-time employment.[21]

This not only implies the benefit of improved control over schedule management, but also suggests that in the broader scheme, online colleges are making higher education more readily available to those for whom economic limitations might otherwise preclude enrollment. The proliferation of online colleges means many aspiring students no longer face a choice between working and learning. For many working Americans who wish to learn new skills, enhance their professional stature, or simply improve their body of knowledge, online education presents a chance to do so without sacrificing either income or career trajectory.

This is one of the reasons that online education has proven so popular among adult learners who wish to balance hectic personal lives with the pursuit of new skills and certifications. According to a CNN (2010) article about employment and online education, “Online degree programs are designed to help adult learners with busy lives earn their degree without being tied down to class times and without having to go to campus,” says Jeff Caplan, dean of strategic enrollment management at American Sentinel University, an online university.”[22]



For prospective students already immersed in a career or who have a family to support, the flexibility and accessibility afforded by online education may make it the only realistic way to return to school.

Over the past decade, online colleges have also seen significant jumps in enrollment from younger members of the workforce. In particular, during the Great Recession that began in 2008, many young graduates who were dissatisfied with the job market ahead of them or who wished to make themselves more valuable to prospective employers found shelter and opportunity at online colleges.

In a marked contrast from the preceding era in which “going back to school” meant leaving one’s job, online colleges are enabling young workers to actually improve their job security. The scheduling flexibility and efficiency of online education is something about which most employers are quite enthusiastic. Indeed, some employers are even willing to help fund this education, if it means employees can use newly learned skills and knowledge within the company. Many larger, publicly traded firms have well-established programs that help to facilitate this kind of continuing online education.

Better Access

In many ways, online education substantially expands and improves access to higher education for countless groups that might otherwise not have the opportunity. For prospective students living in remote geographical settings or sparsely populated rural regions, brick-and-mortar institutions of higher learning may be few and far between.

By contrast, online colleges are physically accessible to all with a computer terminal and a high speed web connection. This diminishes the need for relocation, housing, or a taxing commute for many students. For many others, it does nothing less than make higher education feasible.

This extends to American students who must study from abroad, whether because of personal obligation or military service. The flexibility of scheduling and the elimination of spatial limitations means that students can continue to pursue degree programs from anywhere in the world.

Of course, this access doesn't just apply to people limited due to their immediate geographical surroundings. The same is true for those who struggle with any number of potential impediments to access, mobility, or engagement of campus facilities. Online education eases the transportation burden on those who may struggle with physical disability and can represent a safe alternative to daily use of a university's facilities for the handicapped.

This same benefit makes online education an attractive option for seniors wishing to return to school. Those who lack the means or physical ability to step into a classroom can still gain the knowledge or skills they desire without leaving the house.

That said, many online colleges are still learning how to accommodate a full range of disabilities. A recent federal lawsuit filed against Harvard and MIT casts this challenge into harsh light. According to the suit raised by the National Association of the Deaf, both of these venerable universities are guilty of discrimination against the hearing-impaired for failing to provide captioning for their constantly growing set of online course offerings. According to the *Boston Globe* (2015), the lawsuit targeted the schools because they are among the most prominent and most rapidly expanding providers of "massive open online courses (MOOCs)."[23]

The goal of the suit is to bring greater attention to the need for all online schools to accommodate this and other disabilities with greater inclusiveness. Based on their early responses to the charges, Harvard and MIT appear likely to adopt new standards over the coming year, including captioning for the hearing-impaired.[24]

Though the accessibility of online schools represents a leap forward for broad cross-sections of the population, the case against Harvard and MIT denotes the need for continuing improvement and refinement of what is a relatively young phenomenon in education. The case also suggests a trajectory in which the continued expansion of online education, especially through reputable institutions such as Harvard and MIT, should precipitate a continued improvement in its accessibility, and the standards that define it.

Self-Guided Experience

As a corollary to the improved flexibility and accessibility afforded online college enrollees, this medium also provides freedom from many of the social challenges relating to the college experience. Among the most basic of these advantages, the online student need not navigate campus busing systems, risk the ever-present campus parking ticket, or face the threat of physical tardiness. Students can attend classes without any of these pressures.

Moreover, an article in *U.S. News & World Report* (2013) indicates that online colleges can actually alleviate far more serious pressures. In the last decade, thousands of veterans have returned from war in places like Afghanistan and Iraq. For many, the transition into civilian life is a very difficult one (especially those suffering with post traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD). The G.I. Bill is designed to ease this transition by sending army veterans to college and ultimately helping them gain the skills they need to move into long-term civilian careers.[25]



Nevertheless, not a few veterans struggle to adapt to campus life, while many others simply do not desire this dimension of the educational experience. The article in *U.S. News & World Report* recognizes that for many veterans returning from tours of combat duty, it can be difficult and unappealing to connect with recent high school graduates taking their first steps away from home. The article notes that for many military veterans transitioning into college, an online education is optimal.[26]

Students in online colleges also enjoy an inherent flexibility that allows those who remain affiliated with the military to continue their studies even when their responsibilities call for unusual scheduling demands, geographical relocation, or deployment.

Naturally, these benefits are not reserved for military veterans alone. However, the popularity of online courses among former servicemen and -women is a perfect demonstration of the value of a self-guided learning experience. For those who wish to procure a meaningful education without undertaking the cultural experience of campus living, online colleges may be ideal.

Affordability

College is expensive, usually in money and always in time. Certainly, this has been a major area of concern over recent years among lawmakers, within the media, and even in the nation's highest executive offices. Students are leaving college and graduate school saddled with staggering loan debts and in spite of hand-wringing at the highest levels of government and educational leadership, relief from rising tuition rates does not appear to be on the near horizon.

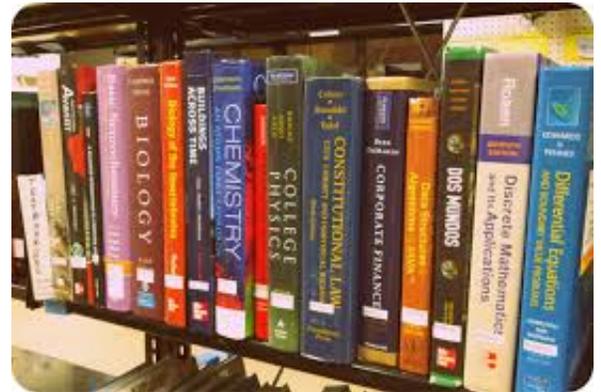
Therefore, it falls upon you, the student, to make informed and intelligent decisions about the wisest way to invest in your education. According to an article published by *Money Crashers* (2014), the College Board reported that “the average cost of tuition and fees for the 2012–2013 school year was \$8,655 for state residents attending public colleges, \$21,706 for out-of-state residents attending public universities, and \$29,056 for students attending private colleges.”[27]

The article points out that these figures do not include the also considerable expenses of housing, food, personal needs, transportation, campus services, and other incidentals related to campus life. Given that the tuition figures cited above will likely only continue to rise, defraying these costs could be a game-changer for many prospective students. Students studying exclusively through online colleges enjoy a university-level education without the traditional expenses associated with the college experience.[28]

Some online courses also provide their own internal, web-based texts to students. This is perhaps more valuable than one may at first realize. The College Board reports that

the average student actually spends an estimated \$1,200 per year on books and supplies, a figure that reflects a meteoric 82 percent rate of inflation between just 2002 and 2013. [29] In fact, says an article by CNBC (2014), the cost of textbooks is so high that in a recent survey of roughly 2000 students from across 150 different campuses, 65 percent indicated that they had opted out of purchasing a required text because its cost was too great.[30]

Online colleges present a far better alternative to simply opting out of crucial classroom material. To many critics of the academic publishing industry, the digital texts used routinely by online colleges point toward a far more equitable textbook market. Accordingly, consumer advocates have called for an expansion of the “open textbook” market, where faculty-composed and peer-reviewed materials are available freely online to students. CNBC reports that a number of major universities have invested in the development of open textbooks, but that uptake remains minimal.[31]



Ultimately, though, this trend gives us cause for optimism that the approach taken by online colleges toward open and accessible digital course materials may actually have a positive and catalyzing impact on traditional education. The innovations that have been born by necessity through online education may actually lead to greater access and lower costs for students in brick-and-mortar classrooms.

Technical Skill Development

High speed Internet and mobile smartphone technology have permeated every aspect of our lives, from the modern workplace to our homes and recreation. From video-conferencing and instantaneous document transmission to telecommuting and global correspondence, web technologies are an absolutely essential part of nearly every business sector today. Those with the skills to harness these technologies will have a considerable advantage in the job market.

As it happens, online education inherently requires you to master many of the technologies and skills that future employees will seek out. Even as you focus on the

content of your online courses, you will naturally adapt to the technical demands that require you to attend live online lectures, access previously recorded media, incorporate research while using required materials, submit your own materials, independently manage your own working timetable, and coordinate with others through a number of web-mediated channels.

All of these are skills that will make you a more valuable candidate to potential employers. An article in the *U.S. News & World Report* (2015) notes that community colleges are often on the cutting edge when it comes to online course offerings. This, the article notes, is at least partially attributable to the fact that the process for approving new courses at a two-year college is faster and less encumbered by bureaucratic hurdles. As a result, online community colleges have been particularly effective at incorporating rapidly evolving technological ideas, processes, and standards into course offerings.[32]

To this end, according to *U.S. News & World Report*, Judy Baker, dean of online learning at San Jose's Foothill College, observes that "employers in Silicon Valley seem to value the skills acquired in community college online courses just as much as in for-profit or four-year institutions...In some ways, community colleges are able to be more agile and responsive to quickly changing workforce training needs." [33]

The article notes that many of the highest-growth employment sectors for online college graduates are those in which web technologies have become an inextricable part of everyday work. This includes fields such as healthcare, energy systems, broadcasting, and marketing.[34] Students of online colleges often have regular contact and familiarity with technologies that the average student does not require. This may serve as a distinct advantage with employers who are seeking demonstrable experience with certain computer-mediated operations.

This is also true for those professions that allow or even require some degree of telecommuting. The "modern workplace" is, in some ways, a figurative term that, like the web itself, transcends the boundaries of time and space. With a mobile phone in every employee's pocket and wireless web access in most corners of the globe, the workplace is everywhere. For positions where travel is required, where working from home can help to offset small business costs, or where one must be accessible at all hours of the

day, the skills gained through an online education will be directly applicable.

The Drawbacks of an Online Education

Clearly, there are numerous benefits to an online education. So, why haven't affordable web addresses completely replaced the high-end real estate of expensive college campuses and extravagantly pillared academic halls?

Well, aside from virtual frat parties simply not measuring up to the real thing, there are pitfalls to online education you must consider before proceeding. As you decide whether an online college is right for you—and consequently, which online college is most likely to meet your needs—you should be aware of the following drawbacks:

Inconsistent Quality Control

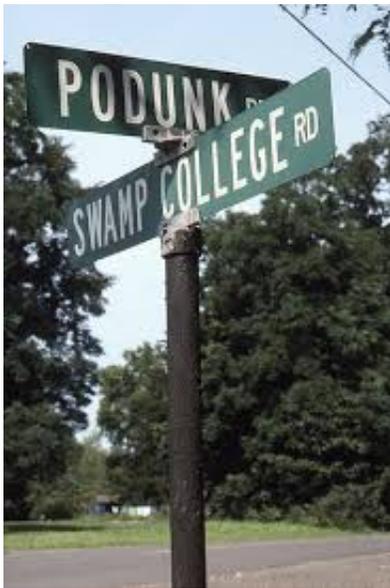
The quality of education, in all its forms and in spite of price tag and name, is highly variable. This is true whether you choose to study at a community college, a private university, or a vocational institute. The array of courses offered, the qualifications represented among educators, the cultural atmosphere, and the general reputation of any educational institution will figure into the value of its degree. The same is true of online education offered by organizations and institutions both storied and recent, venerable and disreputable, defined by educational excellence and by the pursuit of profit.

As with any college application process, what is accessible to you and appealing to you defines your search for the right online college. Make sure you conduct due diligence when researching the quality of the degree program that attracts your interest. It is easy to find accessible online courses offered by highly reputable and respected places of higher learning. But it is just as easy to invest in an online degree program that has little or no practical value. Sadly, the same is true for many traditional degree programs.

In any case, the onus is on you, the prospective student, to seek out an online college that is at once compatible with your needs and worth the money you intend to invest. No matter how affordable your online education is, your degree is only worth as much as the the knowledge and skills you gain and the respect that the degree from that college

or university commands, especially in the workplace.

This is not to say that a university's reputation is the prime factor of importance when it comes to quality of education. In many instances, the degree that you earn will take second seat to the skills you attain during your course of study. If this is true for you, then you need to seek an online college with a positive track record in its quality of instruction. Consider conducting some research on the employment rate for those who have previously graduated from a given online college program. Evidence that graduates are enjoying gainful employment in their chosen field of study is usually a good indicator of an online college's relative quality.



In addition to considering the job placement rate of each online college, you are wise to be wary of those online colleges with low graduation rates. For-profit colleges, on average, have more student turnover than non-profit colleges.

In this connection, an editorial in the *New York Times* (2013) cites a five-year study released in 2011 that monitored the progress of 51,000 students attending Washington State community and technical colleges. The study determined that students who were enrolled in more online as opposed to brick-and-mortar classes were substantially less likely to earn a degree or move on to a four-year college.

The reason offered by researchers is that too many students begin their college education lacking the basic learning skills needed to succeed in college: from independent time management and healthy study habits to competence in compositional English and research capabilities. This is true of students attending both traditional and online college classes. But it means that many students beginning their college education genuinely need the assistance, support, and motivation often found on campus, either through faculty, college counselors, existing student services, or one's classmates. Without access to such a support network, ill-prepared students run the risk of struggling with their academic and personal responsibilities.

This means that in deciding to attend an online college, you need to give very serious consideration to your preparedness to take on its inherent challenges without the support that students attending brick-and-mortar schools are more likely to get. If you feel that you would benefit in a significant way from this support—and for some, such support may mean the difference between graduating and dropping out—online college is likely to present some daunting challenges—indeed, challenges that may hinder you from obtaining a degree.

In part, these challenges drive the focus of the next section.

Lack of Campus Experience

For some students, the campus experience is an absolute necessity. Indeed, college is the first time that many young people will venture out from under the wing of a parent or legal guardian. To a significant extent, this will mark a first attempt at independent living, at managing one's own schedule and personal affairs, and at balancing freedom with responsibility. Campus life is a remarkable educational experience that the online medium cannot replicate.

Stated simply, if you consider this experience to be a necessary part of your personal education, online college is probably not for you. This does not preclude you from taking some online courses from the comfort of a dorm room or off-campus housing facility. However, it does suggest that you are an unlikely candidate for earning a degree exclusively through an online college.



Another drawback is the difficulty of replicating the dynamic experience of being in a classroom or an interactive lecture hall. According to *U.S. News & World Report* (2015), a 2013 study released by the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College found that online students consistently lag behind their counterparts in the university's brick-and-mortar classrooms. In many instances, respondents cited a lack of direct interaction with their fellow students as a major reason. Humans are social beings, and education thrives through social interactions.

One of the features that make college attractive to the inquiring mind is the extent to which it promotes the exchange of ideas and the engagement of discussion that is only possible in a room full of keen fellow learners. For many, the asynchronous rhythm of an online bulletin board system that online colleges provide simply doesn't do enough to simulate as well as stimulate that experience. Though small group interaction is possible through video-conferencing, no technology yet exists that can facilitate the type of rapid-fire exchange and engagement that occurs in the physical classroom.



The same disintermediation can impede the ability of students and educators to develop a constructive working relationship. Without seeking direct engagement, a student may find this mode of communication decidedly more impersonal than even a large lecture hall. When it comes to these features, your personal preference will play a significant part in your

final decision. How much you need or desire face-to-face interaction will be a strong determinant of how satisfied you are likely to be with an online education.

If online colleges are your only option and you have limited background with web-mediated education, prepare yourself for a more solitary learning experience. Moreover, if you feel that you would benefit from real, face-to-face interaction, contact others in your class who might be interested in creating a local study group. As we note in the "Tips" section of this guide, meeting with classmates at a coffee shop or library to discuss course content—or simply to become better acquainted—can be a great way of overcoming the sense of isolation that sometimes accompanies online education.

Cloudy Career Prospects

There is a justifiable concern for many prospective students that some employers view online education with suspicion. Even as online degrees proliferate and gain increasing mainstream credibility, some employers remain skeptical of their value relative to the traditional degree earned by attending a physical campus.

Still, an article in *U.S. News & World Report* (2012) notes that increasingly employers are less concerned with the medium through which individuals receive a degree than with

the institution that bestowed it. The article goes on to say, “hiring managers understand that online courses from top programs, such as Harvard Business School, are credible, according to [Brad] Remillard [cofounder and executive recruiter at IMPACT Hiring Solutions Executive Search in Orange County, Florida]. ‘If Harvard puts this on, it’s probably a high-quality program,’ he says.”[35]

This is to say a degree earned online from a truly venerable institution has the same respect as a traditional degree. Today, employers are accepting online degrees with an increasing sense of normalcy. They are, however, looking over carefully the online colleges which award these degrees.

In the “Tips” section of this guide, we will offer a few recommendations for navigating a job market that has decidedly mixed feelings about online education.

Results May Vary

At the heart of your search for the right online college is your own level of compatibility with web-mediated education. One of the key differences with online colleges is that in many ways you are truly on your own. Much of your research will have to be self-guided. Your ability to maintain an effective study schedule will be up to you. You will have limited access to campus personnel, guidance counselors, and faculty. Therefore, before determining whether online college is the right path for you, make sure you can properly deal with this type of independence.

One of the valuable aspects of campus life is that there are many services and personnel close at hand to help you ease into your course of education. Such services can help you locate academic assistance, plot out your path of study, select your major, and participate in meaningful campus activities. You must do much of this navigation on your own when you attend an online college. This can make for a difficult adjustment period and one that can interfere with your studies.

This is not to say that online education is completely lacking in support services. All online colleges will have some support services. Yet, as with all other aspects of online education, the support services offered will vary from one school to the next. Before beginning an online degree program, make sure that the school in which you are enrolling offers a range of services commensurate to your needs and expectations.



If you feel comfortable flying solo—and many students are more than prepared to do so—an online degree program may be right for you. If this is your first attempt at managing your educational affairs without the assistance of parents or teachers, make sure you are up to the challenge, that you are using all the support services available to you, and that you have somebody in your corner, be it a family member or a professional tutor, to help you through the early stages of transition and hold you accountable.

As an editorial from the *New York Times* (2013) points out, your performance at an online college is determined in large part by the way that you have historically approached education. The editorial observes that “courses delivered solely online may be fine for highly skilled, highly motivated people, but they are inappropriate for struggling students who make up a significant portion of college enrollment and who need close contact with instructors to succeed.”[36]

It is important that you, as the college applicant, know into exactly which of these categories you fall. For some enrollees, compatibility will require the adoption of improved study habits, better schedule management, and a stronger work ethic. Of course, the positive offshoot is that if you can successfully make this transition, you will also be gaining absolutely essential life skills. These skills won't just help you to succeed in your online education; they will make you more valuable to prospective employers.

That said, high rates of non-completion are rampant in online education and suggest that one must be realistic about one's abilities before deciding to go this route.

Accreditation

As you navigate the challenges specific to selecting a college that suits your needs, one important issue you must consider is accreditation. Accreditation is the educational stamp of approval that guarantees your selected academic institution has attained certain standards of operational, procedural, financial, and academic practice.[37]

Accreditation is critical as evidence that a degree-holder is properly credentialed in his or her given field of study. This makes accreditation an important part of turning your degree into employment and subsequent professional growth. Accreditation is also an equalizer among academic institutions, so that degrees, credits, and prerequisites allow one to transfer between accredited institutions. The flip side is if you get course credits or a degree from an unaccredited school and then try to transfer them to an accredited school, you may have your work at the unaccredited school refused.

Accreditation can tell you a great deal about the quality of the college or university of your choice and the value of the degree you seek. Therefore, before we continue our discussion of the online college search process, it is appropriate to spend some time defining and discussing accreditation.

The Importance of Accreditation

There are particulars that you must understand regarding accreditation if you are to effectively differentiate between a reputable college and a college more commonly referred to as a “diploma mill.” Diploma mills are low-quality and sometimes even fraudulent educational companies that prey on prospective college students.

Because there is little overarching or central authority presiding over the American system of higher education, colleges exist across an incredibly broad spectrum of quality and credibility. The accreditation system gives you at least one instrument for determining where a given college falls on this spectrum. That said, the quality and credibility of an accreditation can itself vary as a consequence of the reputation of the accreditation agency. Not all agencies are regarded with equal esteem, a fact that must figure into your search for the right college.



At the very least, the college you are considering should be accredited by an agency that is recognized both by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) and/or by the Council For Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA).[38] These entities are the closest equivalent in our existing system of higher education to central authorities; their recognition should therefore be considered the bare minimum for determining an accrediting agency's credibility.

Another matter of critical importance relates to financial aid. In order to receive federal financial aid, a student must be attending a college or university accredited by a USDE-recognized institution. Similarly, employers who exercise tuition reimbursement programs for employees engaged in ongoing education usually require that the schools their employees attend be USDE-recognized.

Regional Accreditation

Regional Accreditation is the most rigorous and most highly regarded form of accreditation. The Department of Education recognizes the following six regional accrediting agencies:

- Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)
- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS)
- Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC)
- New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC)
- Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)
- Higher Learning Commission (HLC)[39]

As you seek the right college or university for your intended course of study, find out if it has received regional accreditation from the above agency corresponding to a given region. If you are considering a set of colleges in Massachusetts and Connecticut, for instance, seek out the New England Association of Schools and Colleges seal of approval.

According to this association, regional accreditation agencies are responsible for reviewing and certifying the quality of “research universities; community colleges; liberal

arts colleges; state colleges; religiously affiliated institutions; special-purpose institutions in the arts, sciences, and professional fields; military academies; historically black and Hispanic-serving institutions; and tribal colleges.”[40]

This association goes on to note these regional agencies provide this quality assurance in the public, private, profit, non-profit, secular, religious, urban, and rural contexts. Such agencies also provide accreditation regardless of age or student body size.[41]

National Accreditation

National accreditation agencies are often less rigorous in their standards and less beholden to Department of Education oversight. A great many nationally accredited schools are for-profit or vocational institutions. The variance in quality is far greater among institutions that hold only national accreditation without additional regional accreditation. Be sure that you understand the difference between regional and national accreditation agencies and, further, that you know which national accreditation agencies the U.S. Department of Education recognizes.

Accreditation agencies not recognized by the U.S. Department of Education are often shell organizations created to facilitate accreditation for otherwise disreputable schools.

The U.S. Department of Education recognizes the following national accrediting agencies:

- Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges (ACCSC)
- Accrediting Council for Continuing Education and Training (ACCET)
- Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS)
- Council on Occupational Education (COE)
- Distance Education Accrediting Commission (DEAC)[42]

If you desire that the school you attend have one of these national accreditations, you will be wise to focus only those schools that also include the geographically pertinent regional accreditation. Indeed, these distinctions are critical as you navigate the broader system of higher education, particularly as you move between institutions (transferring credits and degrees). Typically, a regionally accredited university won't accept credits from an institution with lesser accreditation. You are likely to run into the same

difficulty if you attempt to enter a master's program at a regionally accredited institution using a bachelor's degree from an institution with only national accreditation.

Online Accreditation

Brick-and-mortar colleges, exclusively online colleges, and colleges with a campus but also offering online education all face the same basic accreditation hurdles. Courses and degree programs need to deliver measurable learning outcomes, and these outcomes apply to online education as much as traditional education. In particular, online courses go through the exact same review process and must meet the same standards as traditional courses. But note, for online education may be additional conditions simply for verifying the identity of online students.[43]

For institutions that provide the majority of their courses (i.e., 51 percent or more) through the online medium, they can supplant regional accreditation with accreditation from the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC). DETC has received recognition from both the U.S. Department of Education and the Council For Higher Education Accreditation for accrediting institutions that provide the majority of their courses online.

Specialized Accreditation

In addition to regional and national accreditation, which you can use to evaluate the quality and credibility of a chosen college or university, there are numerous levels of accreditation you can employ to evaluate a degree program that attracts your interest. Most reputable schools hold a wide range of specialized accreditations in addition to regional recognition.

Specialized accreditation may be important if you are pursuing a degree program from which you anticipate continuing on to graduate school or to a profession. In either event, specialized accreditations can help you to determine how graduate school admissions officers or future employers will look at your degree. The Department of Education recognizes about 40 specialized accrediting agencies, while the Council For Higher Education Accreditation recognizes about 60 agencies.[44]

Examples of leading specialized accreditation agencies include the Council of Occupational Education, the American Bar Association, the American Dental Association,

and the American Psychological Association.

How schools earn accreditation

According to the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), regional accreditation “is a self-regulatory process based on rigorous standards.”[45]

Accordingly, academic institutions receive accreditation based on internal evaluations conducted by colleges and universities and in accordance with such rigorous standards. Once self-review is complete, accrediting commissions call for a peer review of the applying university or college. Following these steps, a commission within the agency determines an institution’s accreditation status. This process should also conclude with a concrete plan of action for subsequent review of accreditation status in the event that consequential changes take place in the way the institution operates.[46]



Schools not awarded accreditation status at the end of this process often receive counsel and support from the accrediting agency so that they can make the changes and improvements needed to merit accreditation.[47] For instance, the accrediting agency may identify lapses in quality or consistency of academic programs, and set out a course of action to redress them before the school can reapply for accreditation. Institutions with accreditation may lose this recognition due to a decline in quality or a problematic change in operations.

Accreditation Resources

- The [Database of Accredited Postsecondary Institutions and Programs](#) is a USDE-maintained site where users can search for accredited online colleges by name, location, or accrediting agency
- The [Database of Institutions and Programs Accredited by Recognized United States Accrediting Organizations](#) is CHEA-maintained site listing accredited schools and programs by discipline, location, and accrediting agency
- The [Directory of Recognized Organizations](#) is CHEA-maintained site rating accrediting agencies
- The [College Navigator](#) is a National Center for Education Statistics–maintained

search engine of school accreditation status and accrediting agency

- **Accrediting agency websites** are agency-maintained sites provide lists of accredited colleges and universities
- College websites are college-maintained sites that can be used to find information about accreditations and accrediting agencies

Tips for Getting the Most Out of Your Online Education

At this point, you should have a pretty good understanding of both the benefits and drawbacks of an online education. You also probably realize that you don't necessarily have to choose between online and traditional education. The facts and findings outlined in the above sections suggest that a majority of students today are taking a blended approach to education, balancing both traditional and online classes in order to complete a given course of study, earn a professional certification, or pursue an advanced degree. How you approach your online education is largely up to you.

So, now that you understand what to expect, how do you get started?

In the sequel, we offer a few basic tips that will make you a savvier online college applicant and a better online student. As you seek out the school that's right for you, arm yourself with information, approach with enthusiasm, and proceed with caution.

Make an Informed Decision

We can't stress enough the importance of doing your research before you choose an online college. Affordable or not, you need to know that you'll be getting the most out of your investment. Know the difference between online colleges that provide a quality education and those that exist solely to turn a profit.

According to a 2012 study from the Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Education and Employment (CAPSEE), the quality of online colleges is inconsistent and variable because of the fast growth and deep entrenchment of certain online colleges whose main interest seems to be turning a profit rather than academic excellence. The study identifies "a group of institutions that give post high school degrees or credentials and

for which some of the legal” constraints that bind traditional schools do not apply. For instance, the report notes, these institutions “can enter the equity market and have few constraints on the amounts they can legally pay their top managers.”[48]

In this regard, the CAPSEE study has its sights especially set on for-profit online colleges. At TBS, we know of for-profit online colleges that offer a fine education and we also know of well-regarded non-profit online colleges that leave much to be desired. Moreover, it is simplistic to see for-profit colleges as motivated purely by money and non-profit colleges as motivated purely by academic excellence. For-profit colleges, if they are to succeed in the long run, need to provide a good product and thus are incentivized to strive for academic excellence. Alternatively, non-profit colleges can be tempted to cash in on their non-profit status, milking the government for student loans to cover their ever upward spiraling tuition costs. Virtue as well as villainy are thus distributed throughout both the for-profit and non-profit online educational sectors.

Still, the CAPSEE study is right to underscore that the rate of default on student loan repayment at for-profit institutions is nearly twice that for students attending public institutions. According to CAPSEE, the two-year cohort default rate for students from for-profit schools (whether graduating or dropping out) was 11.6 percent in 2008. This compares to a 6 percent rate at public universities and a 4 percent rate among those who have attended private non-profits.[49]

Accordingly, the CAPSEE study draws the following conclusion about for-profit colleges: “For-profit institutions account for a large and rising share of federal financial aid. For-profit students have much higher default rates and account for 47 percent of defaults today. Default rates have been rising in recent years particularly for the for-profit chains and beyond what can be accounted for by basic student characteristics.”[50]

This does not mean that you should limit your search to non-profit schools. Indeed, some for-profit schools have had remarkable success forging corporate partnerships and helping employees of corporations advance their education. Stories of success as well as stories of failure cover the entire gamut of American online education.

What this all means is that in searching for the right online college, you need to be thorough, exercising due diligence, and leaving nothing to chance. It should be your

objective to weed out any potential colleges that have historically performed poorly where certain key indicators are concerned. Specifically, you will want to avoid enrolling in online colleges that have high rates of non-completion; colleges whose former enrollees have experienced a higher than average rate of student loan repayment default in the years after departing school; and colleges whose graduates have struggled to find or maintain suitable employment.



Moreover, you'll want to check out the relative performance of those online colleges that offer courses in your area of interest. Search for rankings through sites like TheBestSchools.org to determine how the online colleges on your list rate. Make sure that before you enroll in an online college, you have conducted a thorough survey of its educational offerings. Be sure that it has everything you need, including a strong track record where educational outcomes and degree credibility are concerned.

On this last point, reputation is a significant factor. If it is your goal to earn a degree from your online college and to subsequently present that degree to a prospective employer, be sure that the school in which you plan to enroll is one that your future employer is likely to take seriously. Avoid online colleges who have earned a public reputation for producing lackluster curricula, mediocre instruction or, in some cases, even dishonest business practices. It is always a wise move to cross-check your intended online college against a Google search of pertinent news articles, scholarly journal pieces, or large-scale research reports. These may help you to differentiate credible online colleges from those that have a history that is less than savory.

As we will discuss further in the section below on securing your future place in the job market, your choice of online college is a critical one to employers. According to an article produced by CNN (2010), an Excelsior College and Zogby International poll found that 61 percent of American small business owners and CEOs said that they were familiar with the concept of online education.[51]

The article goes on to note that of these business owners and CEOs, a compelling 83 percent said that they viewed an online degree to be equally as credible as one earned

through a traditional campus-based program. According to CNN, “employers said such factors as the accreditation of the college or university, the quality of its graduates and the name of the institution awarding the degree were among other things they considered to make an online degree more credible.”

Learn which online degrees employers hold in esteem and use this knowledge to guide your online college search. You may even want to conduct your own survey among local small business owners and CEOs. Make some phone calls or send some emails to local leaders in a field that interests you. Before you begin your search for the right online college, ask how receptive these employers have been in the past to hiring employees with online degrees. You may even consider inquiring about a few specific online colleges that have produced employees for these hiring firms. This could prove a strong starting point for your search and can also afford you a stronger understanding of the features that future employers are looking for in an online degree.

Bear this in mind as you approach your enrollment decision: You will carry your school’s reputation into the job market with you.

Become an Independent Learner

As noted earlier in this account, one of the greatest challenges that many online students will face is that of adapting to true independence. For those who are self-motivated, who learn quickly on their own, and who have a demonstrated ability to manage a work and study schedule with balance, online college will make for an easy transition.

This is not true for everybody, however. If this level of independence is new to you, prepare yourself for what is ahead. In order to succeed in an online degree program, you must forge effective study habits, well-honed research practices, and a homework routine that works for you. Perhaps one of the best ways to do this is to initiate your online college experience very gradually. You don’t necessarily have to launch headlong into a multi-year degree program from the start. You could consider taking only a single class or just a few manageable courses as a practice run, perhaps through a local community where the cost per credit hour tends to be very low. Once you see how well you are handling one or two online courses, you will be in a better position to decide whether you are ready to handle a bigger course load.

You may find that you are a natural when it comes to managing your own schedule and working at your own pace. On the other hand, you might find that success in your chosen field of online study will require you to become a better studier, researcher, reader, writer, and technology user. You must get organized to succeed as an independent learner. Keep a calendar of your courses and assignments handy. Maintaining both a digital and a handwritten calendar can help to remind you of responsibilities and reinforce scheduling commitments. Use these instruments to plan ahead and to realistically balance your personal and academic responsibilities.

Making daily “to-do” lists is also a constructive way to keep yourself on track. And don’t be afraid to ask for help if you’re new at this. Seek advice from friends, relatives, and others who have been down the same path. Once you get into a good working rhythm, you should be ready to take on a full online course load.



Master the Technology

In the “Benefits” section of this guide, we discussed the value of interfacing with cutting edge learning technology when you attend an online college. However, computer skills and savvy web usage does not come naturally to all learners attending online colleges. If this is your first time using your computer in a truly immersive way, it is important that you take the time to learn and master its capabilities. As an article in the *Washington Post* (2012) indicates, there is far more to online college than simply “learning which buttons to press.”

Indeed, the article stresses that successful online education is “about being at the center of many learning activities. You’ll gain practice expressing yourself online in a range of activities, from offering an opinion and supporting it with evidence in a discussion thread to reflecting on your experience as a learner in a blog. There are more ways than ever for teams to collaborate on projects across time and space. You might find yourself in a Google Hangout with your classmates so that you can see and hear one another as you work on a presentation. Though many workplaces allow for a remote experience, when learning online you cannot count on resolving something at a face-to-face meeting. Learning online promotes building new collaboration muscles.”[52]

Always bear in mind, however, that in online education, technology is a tool to help you gain knowledge and skills. Technology is a means to an end. Therefore, don't let technology intimidate you. Technology can be learned and there are lots of resources to help you learn it. Learning to use the hardware and software at your fingertips with confidence and efficiency will not only spare you frustration and make you a more productive student, it will help you to establish more open and intimate lines of communication with instructors and classmates. As we explore in the next section, your ability to create and maintain these lines of communication will have a strong bearing on your experience in online college.

Create Connections

For many students, the greatest virtue of online education is the ability it affords one to learn, study, and even communicate from the comfort and privacy of one's own home. For as many others, however, this is actually its biggest drawback. The absence of face-to-face interaction with professors or classmates can deprive students of the academic and emotional support that these relationships often foster in an on-campus setting.

One of the best steps that you can take to improve your online educational experience is to use the technology in your hands to create real and meaningful connections. Establish a personal relationship through correspondence with your instructor. Create an open pathway for communication so that you will feel comfortable asking questions or seeking assistance should the need arise.

Be sure to avail yourself of the talents and knowledge of your instructor, even if you never have the opportunity to sit in the same room together. If you have never forged a constructive long-term working relationship via web communication, you might be surprised at how strong a communicative bond you can form. This is a powerful remedy against the isolation that often complicates online learning for some students.



You can achieve the same remedy when you make an effort to interact more closely with your fellow students. Become a regular and active contributor to bulletin board discussions and peer review sessions. You should also consider reaching out individually to online classmates in order to create either virtual or physical study groups, or even to plan casual

social meet-ups just to blow off steam. Even if you aren't sharing campus space, you and your classmates are sharing the challenges of navigating course material, working independently, and balancing personal responsibilities. Making a few friends could go a long way toward feeling part of a real class.

Job-Hunt with Caution

This is truly the burning question when it comes to online education: Will I be able to get a job with my online degree?

This front has mixed news. Some employers still have reservations based on the high variability in academic quality that exists in the online education sphere. Adding to this skepticism is the pervasive tendency among many employers toward conservative hiring practices, preferring a traditional campus-based education for employees to an online education.

However, this skepticism and conservatism are starting to give way as a generation of business leaders raised on web technology increasingly assume control in the private sector. Indeed, an article in *Time* magazine (2012) reveals that "According to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), employers' views of online education have improved over the past five to 10 years. More than half of human-resources managers SHRM surveyed for an August 2010 report said that if two applicants with the same level of experience were applying for a job, it would not make a difference whether the job candidate's degree was obtained through an online program or a bricks-and-mortar university." [53]

The article goes on to point out that 75 percent of those surveyed indicated that they had in fact hired at least one applicant with an online degree in the previous 12 months.

[54] That said, the very same survey indicates that 66 percent of respondents felt online degree-holding applicants were not viewed as favorably as those with degrees earned in a traditional setting.[55]

Managing these conflicting findings can be a challenge. On the subject, cofounder and executive recruiter at IMPACT Hiring Solutions Executive Search (Orange County, Florida), Brad Remillard, offers a sound piece of advice to those seeking employment with an online degree. There is no need, nor is there any law, nor is there any ethical standard that requires individuals to indicate they earned their degree online. To the contrary, one's résumé must only identify the university that awarded a degree. In most cases, there is no special notation indicating an individual earned their degree through an online college.[56]

This underscores the recommendation to exercise discretion when applying for a job. There is never a reason to specify on your résumé whether you earned your degree online or in a traditional classroom setting. Increasingly, students are experiencing higher education through a blended course of study that includes some combination of online learning and physical class time. Thus, the perceived dividing line between these two modes of education is becoming increasingly blurred to prospective employers. As online education continues its expansion into traditional institutions of higher learning and becomes a necessary part of the course catalogue for major colleges and universities, employers are becoming less apt to scrutinize the medium through which your degree was earned, though perhaps increasingly likely to place greater stock in the reputation of the college or university from which you earned it.

Some employers may even place a higher premium on prospective employees who have demonstrated the ability to manage their own education, to work well with others from a distance, and to operate on a flexible and non-traditional schedule. Indeed, the same skills that one might exercise to successfully complete an online education are highly adaptable to a wide array of 21st century jobs.



Still, for all of these gains, there are employers who may view online education as subject to too great a variance in quality. There are employers who, if pressed to choose between two worthy candidates, will instinctively choose one with a brick-and-mortar education over one with an online degree. Some employers are just plain old-fashioned.

The recruitment and interview process may reveal an employer who is receptive to or even places greater value on the online educational experience. As a future job-seeker, it is best to use your judgment when deciding to articulate or omit information regarding the medium through which you received your degree. Ultimately, as we have noted throughout this discussion, the institution from which you earn your degree and the applicability of the skills you have gained there will be of the utmost importance to employers. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to once again stress this point:

In choosing an online college, cast a wide net, carefully sift through your options, and exercise all due diligence!

Conclusion

Now that you have a better understanding of online education, you should be ready to choose the best online college for your needs. You should also have a stronger sense of the steps you must take in order to be ready for the challenges ahead.

For your easy reference, we offer this concise review:

Benefits

- Improved Flexibility
- Better Access
- Self-Guided Experience
- Affordability
- Technical Skill Development

Drawbacks

- Inconsistent Quality Control
- Lack of Campus Experience
- Cloudy Career Prospects
- Results May Vary

Tips

- Make an Informed Decision
- Become an Independent Learner
- Master the Technology
- Create Connections
- Job Hunt with Caution

We invite you to apply this knowledge as you begin the process of choosing an online college, online course of study, and online degree program. We also offer a few useful points of entry. The first place to look is our ranking at the start of this article: [The 50 Best Online Colleges for 2015–16](#). In addition, see our analysis of [The 25 Best Online Degrees](#) in today's job market as well as our breakdown of [The Best Online College in Each of America's Fifty States](#).

We wish you the best of luck in your search for the right online college!

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