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Maryland's virtual campus

CAROL FREY
Special to The Daily Record
May 29, 2009

One of the few remaining barriers to higher education on the Internet is finding the right program among the thousands vying for students' attention.

Nevertheless, the Internet offers solutions to the problem it has created. Clinical psychologist Vicky Phillips, author of "Never Too Late to Learn: The Adult Student's Guide to College," answers a multitude of questions at www.geteducated.com. The Web site also has a database of phony diploma mills.

Narrowing the choice to accredited programs is a must, given federal student loan program requirements. The U.S. Department of Education lists the accrediting agencies approved for financial aid purposes at www.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/accreditation_pg10.html.

In searches for online schools, one name popping up frequently is the University of Maryland University College, which had more than 63,000 students working toward degrees online last year.

Next week, Luis Ascanio of Bethesda will be receiving a master's degree that he earned online from UMUC. Ascanio completed the coursework in two-and-a-half years while still at the helm of his own pharmaceutical company, Sinergium S.A.

Previously, Ascanio had earned degrees in the 1980s from the University of Kansas and the University of Paris VII-Jussieu. His resume includes work at Schering-Plough and two other American pharmaceutical firms.

"I had been following biotechnology on my own, reading and attending events," he said.

He wanted more up-to-date knowledge in biotechnology, a field that dramatically affects his business. Yet, with a business and a family, full-time study was out of the question. After weighing UMUC's program with Johns Hopkins University's online option, Ascanio decided to take the scientist's approach and experiment with a couple of UMUC courses online. During the second semester, he took three courses on the Shady Grove campus.

"I was skeptical," he said. "To my surprise, I was completely delighted. It was as rigorous as face-to-face courses, maybe more."

Ascanio found that communicating with professors and other students in writing required more depth in his thinking. It's impossible to hide online, he said, because professors require students to post their opinions and ideas about the material every week. Students are often asked to moderate these discussions.

Professors are accessible, he said, but sometimes not immediately. In those instances, students rely on each other for help. "You do find people who are hard to interact with, some professors, but you would find that anywhere," he said.

Not surprisingly, Ascanio said he became more proficient on his computer by studying online. Those skills he plans to use staying abreast of biotech developments through the university library.

Other attributes of a successful online college student, according to Ascanio, are: being disciplined enough to work without prompting; being cooperative with other students; being able to negotiate the time for study with bosses and families; and being willing to give up free time for themselves.

"This kind of learning format is going to be very important in retraining people during this recession," Ascanio said.

It already is. Nationally, 3.9 million students took courses online last year. For its part, UMUC saw its online enrollment last year swell by 4,000 students over the previous year and expects continued growth for the foreseeable future. UMUC added 86 new faculty members last year for a total of 800 in the graduate school, said Michael Frank, vice provost and dean of the Graduate School of Management and Technology.

"Given our growth, we're expanding all the time. We want to keep the ratio of students to faculty small," Frank said.

In contrast to many schools, online education is UMUC's primary mission, he said. More than 90 percent of graduate courses are available online, and all a student needs for admission is a bachelor's degree.

"We serve all comers and we have the services to back it up," Frank said, mentioning UMUC's tutors and extra instruction in writing and library research for those who need it.

Other institutions implement distance learning to varying degrees. Loyola College in Maryland spokeswoman Courtney Jolley said some graduate courses include online elements, making them a sort of hybrid classroom/distance learning class. This would allow those already in a career some flexibility as to when they would have to come to an actual classroom.

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"But we strongly believe in the importance of the classroom," Jolley said.

Goucher College offers its slate of graduate programs with a largely online component. For example, its master's of fine arts creative nonfiction writing programs consists of two years and includes four semesters of work; an internship; two spring mini-residencies; two two-week summer residencies; and a final partial residency the summer the student graduates.

Goucher spokeswoman Kristin Keener said the model appeals to those just coming off a traditional, four-year degree track as well as those that have been out of school for longer. She said the larger online component is designed to appeal to mid-career individuals who might not have the time to make it to the classroom as much.

"The programs are meant to reach not only a geographic breadth of prospective students but to people throughout their careers," Keener said.

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