

# Choosing the right distance learning school for you

## Tips for researching online degree programs

By Jim Herhusky

*There is no doubt online degree programs can be an important option for those serving in the military and others who require or desire the flexibility that distance learning offers. In fact, in 2008, one in 10 students are expected to take classes online according to a recent study — maybe even you. As more schools begin offering courses online, it can be difficult to weed through the options. How do you know if a school is credible? How can you tell whether the degree program is a fit for you?*

*Here are some tips to help you navigate the many online programs available today.*

### Where to start?

The most important resources to consider are those closest to you — your friends, colleagues and advisors. These trusted sources can provide the honest, objective opinions to help you make the best decision. What's more, their opinions often reflect how future employers will view your degree. Your degree — and the university from which you graduate — should tell employers you have the knowledge and commitment necessary to succeed in the workplace.

### Researching schools online

The next step is to research data available from the universities and other educational resources. Researching online is a logical place to begin your search. Start with a series of keyword searches on a major search engine, such as Google or Yahoo. Be specific and move beyond broad keywords like “online degree” or “university.” Instead, consider keywords related to your desired program of study — “online psychology degree” or “online homeland security degree,” for example. This will narrow results to those schools with your desired program.

The search results will likely offer links to schools as well as to education directories or education portals. Directories and portals provide information about multiple schools and may have no affiliation with the schools themselves. They can be an efficient way to identify and compare potential schools.

When evaluating information from these sources, keep these tips in mind:

Some directories are very comprehensive, while others promote only one or a few

schools. One way to tell is to look for advertising contact information. If the site does not list contact information, such as a phone number, it probably is a third-party site marketing for the school(s) listed.

Even comprehensive directories present varying degrees of information. For example, [www.gradschools.com](http://www.gradschools.com) offers basic free listings as well as sells enhanced listings to schools.

Some directories only list those universities that advertise with them. With this model, a school typically pays the site for “leads” — the contact information you fill out in an online form when you request information.

The bottom line: Directories and portals are a good place to start your research, but should not be your only method. You may want to consider other online information sources, such as blogs. Keep in mind, though, that some are “marketers” in disguise.

Next step: university websites

Once you narrow down a list of schools, go directly to the schools' websites to gather program details. Research such information as:

Details about the school, its mission, affiliations, etc.

Program and course offerings

Prerequisites and entrance requirements

Faculty credentials and accreditation status

Make sure the institution's accrediting body is recognized by the U.S.

Department of Education ([www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov)) and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation ([www.chcea.org](http://www.chcea.org))

Tuition, fees, financial aid, etc.

Specifics about the online classroom experience, including login requirements

Some sites may offer a virtual tour of the university and a look inside the “e-classroom.” Tours can help you gauge how much students and professors interact. For example, does the course offer discussion groups? Are audio or video technologies used in the classroom? Also, look for asynchronous ways to interact, such as newsgroups and web forums. Asynchronous means that you do not have to log in at a certain time to participate. Synchronous tools, on the other hand, require you to log in at specific times. They include live chats, shared whiteboards, teleconferences or videoconferences.

### Digging deeper

Now, you're ready to start communicating with the school directly. Find out about the school's experience with online education — and how long they have been offering your particular program. Ask to speak with students and alumni about their experiences. Find out how their degrees influenced career opportunities.

Here's what one online student has to say about his choice: “My master's courses are helping me become a better military intelligence officer — and a better business owner,” says Hans Mumm, who is pursuing a master's degree in strategic intelligence at American Military University. Mumm is a first lieutenant in the U.S. Army Reserve. He also owns a robotics company.

“I'm gaining that competitive edge,” he says.

Once you have explored these topics, you are well on your way to hitting the books at the school that's right for you.

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