

THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION: Accelerated Degrees *and* Online Learning

By KATIE MARKEY MCLAUGHLIN



Many working women want to go back to school but worry about making it work with their busy schedules and family responsibilities. What they often don't realize, however, is that higher education is undergoing major changes in order to better accommodate students just like them.

"It's the future of higher education," said Kevin Ezzell, director of accelerated and graduate programs for Albright College. "The model of a four-year residential degree is always going to exist, but if you examine the trends, you see other types of degree programs growing more and more popular."

Karen Pollack, assistant vice provost for online undergraduate and blended programs for Penn State University, agrees.

"Working women are one of Penn State World Campus's target demographics," she said. "Our average

student is working and has family responsibilities."

Accelerated Degree Programs

As the name implies, accelerated degree programs allow students to earn their degrees at a faster pace than usual—but without sacrificing learning outcomes.

"You accelerate the classroom experience, but you're making sure

that the outcomes at the end of the course are parallel to those at the end of a longer course," explained Ezzell, who is also on the board of the Council for Accelerated Programs.

The idea is not to reduce the number of hours a student puts into a course, but rather to shift where and how those hours occur—replacing some traditional classroom time with more out-of-classroom experiences.

We're always looking for opportunities for students to acquire credit commensurate with the knowledge or experience they've gained in the working world.

The benefits of that shift are immense for working professionals, who usually cannot commit to attending a class several times per week for a full semester. At Albright, Ezzell said, most classes meet just one night per week for five to seven weeks.

Depending on the school and program, some courses may be offered partially or entirely online. At the very least, most will have an important online component—be it watching video lectures outside of class or completing group projects with the help of online tools like Google Drive, a cloud-based service for storing and sharing files.

The speed at which a student can complete her degree varies depending on how many credits she has upon admission. Ezzell said at Albright some students can earn their undergraduate degrees in as little as 22 to 24 months.

"The bulk of our students come in with at least some college credits," he

Albright College Accelerated Degree Programs

Lancaster • Harrisburg • Reading

Transfer up to 78 previous college credits
Accelerated classes meet one night per week
Guaranteed schedule for courses in major;
no scheduling surprises

Scholarships available for partner
community college graduates



www.albright.edu/adp
1-888-253-8851 • adp@albright.edu

Albright
COLLEGE

explained. “Part of being a strong accelerated program is having a flexible policy for transfer credits.”

What’s more, students can earn college credit for some of their life experiences that involved college-level learning or training.

“It’s not credit just for living life,” Ezzell said, “but if you’ve done trainings or courses and have documentation on them, we can take those experiences and equate them into college credits.”

He also noted that many schools will consider students’ results on the College Level Examination Program (CLEP), which is a group of standardized tests created by the College Board that assesses college-level knowledge in areas of study like English, history, languages, and the sciences.

By performing well on the CLEP, students can save themselves time and money by transferring those results into college credits.

Online Learning

Online degree programs are another great option for working women. These programs are rapidly increasing in popularity, making them more accessible than ever before.

While some schools offer degrees that are partially online—meaning you would still need to attend some in-person classes—other institutions offer programs that can be completed entirely through the Web.

“Our mantra is anytime, anywhere,” said Pollack of the Penn State World Campus.

Courses there do not require students to log online at any specific time, since students can be attending from all over the country and even the globe.

Instead, assignments have structured weekly deadlines, but students have the flexibility to determine when and how to meet them.

“The draw of online learning is the convenience and flexibility,” Pollack explained. “You don’t have to try to find a program that will work around your schedule.”

These days you can complete

almost any degree online. Smaller institutions may offer more limited options, but larger schools—such as the Penn State World Campus—have almost every degree available online for both undergraduate and graduate students.

Pollack also emphasized that online learning doesn’t mean sacrificing interaction with instructors and peers. Faculty members communicate with students regularly, and collaborative projects are still key components of most courses.

In terms of assessing student outcomes, many online courses favor student projects and papers over exams, although new technology is even making virtual exams more feasible.

Programs also use a variety of methods and technological tools to validate that students are who they say they are—and that they’re the ones completing the work.

Similar to accelerated programs, online learning programs usually have flexible policies for transferring credits, and real-world experiences can also count toward your degree.

“We’re always looking for opportunities for students to acquire credit commensurate with the knowledge or experience they’ve gained in the working world,” Pollack said.

Ready to Enroll?

Ezzell encourages working women not to be intimidated by programs geared toward adult learners just because they’re different from traditional higher education.

“Don’t ever let anyone say you can’t do something because you’re an adult student,” he said.

Pollack adds that working students often enhance the dynamics of a course in important ways.

“Students who bring real-world experience to the class dramatically elevate the level of conversation in any course,” she said. “They allow for a much deeper level of understanding, which benefits everyone.” **B**