

## **ONLINE BUSINESS DEGREES: OPTIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES**

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Oftentimes, the formal business or management education received during college (undergraduate and veterinary) is insufficient to prepare veterinarians for the rigors of practice ownership or senior management positions within a larger organization in industry. The pursuit of a formal business degree, usually at the graduate level, may provide graduate veterinarians with additional information and knowledge that can complement their veterinary clinical skills and allow for success in business and management endeavors. Also, obtaining a graduate level business degree can help veterinarians pursue a career change outside of clinical practice if so desired. When evaluating graduate business programs, veterinarians should consider the benefits of online learning.

Online learning is defined by the US Department of Education (DOE) as “The acquisition of knowledge and skills through mediated information and instruction. It encompasses all technologies and supports the pursuit of lifelong learning for all.” While the growth of online college degrees and courses is well noted, people usually have two main questions regarding these programs (1) Are the degrees real? and (2) Do students learn as much as in traditional classroom settings? The answer to both questions is yes. When degrees are obtained from institutions of higher learning accredited by an approved accrediting agency (approved by the US DOE), the degrees are real. Also, research indicates that there is no difference in learner outcomes and satisfaction between traditional classroom and distance education<sup>1,2,3,4</sup>.

There has been tremendous growth in online education during the past decade. The Sloan Consortium is a group that publishes an annual report about online education each year. According to these reports, online education became a regular component of higher education in 2003/4<sup>5</sup>. In the 2005 report, greater than 60% of schools with traditional classes offered online graduate courses and degree programs and 2/3 to 3/4 of online courses were taught by traditional faculty members<sup>6</sup>.

The Master of Business Administration (MBA) is the most sought after online business degree. Typical MBA curricula include courses on management, communication, human resources (or organizational behavior), marketing, information technology, economics, finances, and accounting. Specializations in the following areas are now available; human health care management, human resources, international business, marketing, information technology, and leadership.

Since adults learn best through interaction and experience, online business degrees satisfy many learner desires<sup>1</sup>. To ensure that the learning experience is as rich as in the traditional setting, the online business degrees of today emphasize the application of newly acquired knowledge to real-life experiences, interaction between students (through electronic means), feedback from course facilitators and fellow students, and teamwork<sup>7,8</sup>. This emphasis sets the stage for today’s business environment by enabling students to learn valuable team building skills as well as how they can provide the appropriate level of feedback on projects and ideas.

Online education has flourished for a variety of reasons. The two most cited reasons are the ability for a student to work at his or her own pace, and on their own schedule<sup>9</sup>. Additionally, online education removes geographical and physical restrictions for both the student and instructor<sup>10,11</sup>. Adult workers looking to return to school and enhance their marketability in the workforce do not need to contend with the time and travel needs imposed if choosing a land-based degree program. A less mentioned reason for online programs is the access to rare professional programs. One illustrated case is that of bachelors and masters programs in human clinical research<sup>12</sup>.

Many employers and others agree that individuals who successfully complete online degree programs are disciplined, hardworking, and self-motivated. These individuals possess good writing skills (as programs are writing based), have the ability to work both in teams and independently, have a high degree of comfort with the internet and computers, and possess excellent time management skills<sup>1,11</sup>. Online classes have the ability to potentially eliminate a lot of bias and accommodate the various learning styles of adults. Large companies do see the value in online higher education and are increasingly more accepting of degrees obtained exclusively online<sup>2</sup>.

Key questions to ask of a college or university before enrollment in an online program include questions on the institution's accreditation status, technological support programs, mechanisms to keep course content current, and instructor qualifications. Potential students need to ask themselves if they are self-directed enough, have the required technology, are comfortable with the technology, and possess sufficient writing skills.

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