

Cyber *Education* gains ground

On-line degrees are more popular than ever, but learner beware:

Evaluate programs for cost, content, and accreditation carefully.

Not all degrees are created equally.

Want to go back to school for a master's degree in public health (MPH) or business administration (MBA), but can't figure out how to manage it with your 60- to 70-hour work week? It's unlikely that you'd want to give up your practice or dramatically reduce your hours, so why not consider earning a degree by studying on line?

Currently, there are approximately 2.5 million students in distance education programs in the United States, according to the [Distance Education and Training Council](#). While sitting in the comfort of your study, you could log on to the program's Web site to listen to lectures, read assignments, and do other work.

One physician who earned his MPH on line is Mike Green, MD. It's not surprising that Green choose to earn his MPH degree primarily through on-line study considering where he lives and works: The 34-year-old is

chief of staff at the Weeneebayko General Hospital in Moose Factory, Ontario, an island without road access located in the middle of the Moose River. Weeneebayko General Hospital is the most remote northern hospital in the province of Ontario.

Green also is a clinical lecturer and the program director of the third-year residency program in aboriginal health in the family medicine department at Queens University in Moose Factory.

In 2002, Green graduated from the MPH program at [Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health](#) in Baltimore. The program was ranked number one among MPH programs in 2001, the most recent ranking by *U.S. News & World Report*. The 80-unit program is primarily conducted via the Internet; however, 20 units must be earned at the campus. Courses typically range from one to seven units, so full-time students complete the program in one year.

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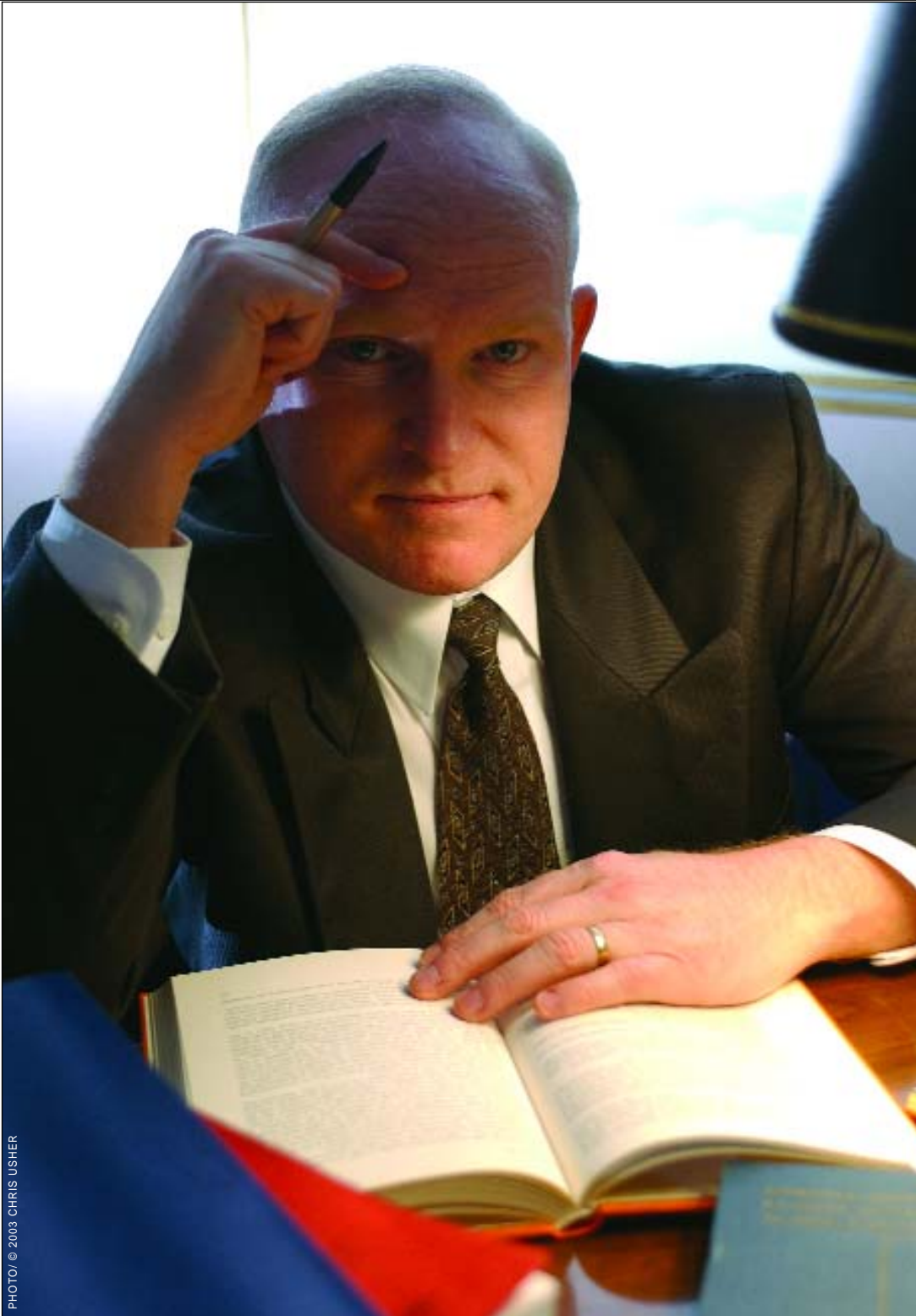


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Rich Douglas, MBA surveyed 267 hiring managers to determine employers' acceptance of various degrees and how employers are influenced by a school's accreditation. "What I found is that human resource professionals are not familiar with many schools and don't check them out. This means that holders of degrees from on-line programs won't get a lot of scrutiny about the nature of their degrees or the issuing schools." Douglas, a corporate trainer and a PhD candidate at Union Institute and University in Cincinnati, conducted the survey for his dissertation.

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Green says, "The [on-line] courses were at least as good as the on-site ones in terms of the lecture content and how it was delivered. They were well organized in terms of homework and work groups. I

didn't find them to be inferior in any way from taking the courses face-to-face."

No easy degree
However, not everyone has such a fa-

vorable experience. Some students mistakenly believe that their school is accredited by a recognized agency even though it is not (see "All About Accreditation," below); others can't find the time to study and drop out.

All About Accreditation

The most important factor to consider when evaluating a program is accreditation, according to author and consultant John Bear, PhD. "If I have one thing to say to a potential student, it's to be careful, and do your due diligence, and make sure the school is legitimate."

Bear has worked as a distance learning consultant for the FBI and a dozen universities. He is the author or co-author of 29 books, including seven on distance learning.

Rich Douglas, MBA, agrees. In fact, Douglas says he knows of several physicians who hold academic degrees from schools that are not legitimate because the programs are not accredited by recognized agencies. Douglas, a corporate trainer, is a PhD candidate in a program featuring a specialization in non-traditional higher learning at Union Institute and University in Cincinnati, Ohio.

When considering accreditation, make sure the accreditation agency is recognized under "Generally Accepted Accrediting Principles" (GAAP). According to *Bears' Guide to Earning Degrees by Distance Learning* (15th Edition, published by Ten Speed Press, 2003), "To offer recognized accreditation under GAAP, an accrediting agency must meet at least one of the following four criteria: 1) Recognized by the [Council on Higher Education Accreditation \(CHEA\)](#) in Washington, DC; 2) Recognized by the [U.S. Department of Education](#); 3) If not based in the United States, recognized (or more commonly, part of) the relevant national education agency; 4) Schools the

agency accredits are routinely listed in one or more of the following publications: the [International Handbook of Universities](#), the [Commonwealth Universities Yearbook](#), the [World Education Series](#), or the [Countries Series](#)." More detailed information on this standard is available in Bear's book.

Students attending schools accredited by agencies that don't meet this standard may find that the program's quality is poor and that their degree is not recognized by employers, says Bear. Worse yet, according to Bear, an employer may reprimand or fire an employee after finding out that the person's degree is from such a school. Bear adds, "I'm consulting as an expert witness for a large company that just discovered its chief financial officer has an MBA from a school that is accredited by an unrecognized agency. The company has been listing that he has an MBA on their Securities and Exchange Commission reports and company annual reports." Additionally, a reporter may uncover this fact, resulting in an avalanche of bad publicity.

In some cases, students mistakenly believe their school is accredited by an agency recognized by GAAP when it is not. It's not surprising that students become confused. "There are there are 161 unrecognized accrediting agencies currently operating, many of which have similar names to the valid industries," says Bear.

Bear suggests that physicians narrow their search to MPH and MBA programs that meet the following standards: 1) The entire school is regionally accredited, or 2) the entire school is regionally accredited, and the

program is professionally accredited.

There are six U.S. regional accreditation agencies, all of which are listed at the end of this article. Double- and triple-check the accrediting agency as the names of agencies that are not recognized by GAAP are very similar to the agencies that are recognized. Regional accreditation ensures students that their degrees will probably be recognized by other educational institutions and employers. This is important for students who would like to work in academia, continue their education, seek tuition reimbursement, or look for a job.

The most prestigious MPH programs are accredited by the [Council on Education for Public Health](#). The most prestigious MBA programs are accredited by the AACSB International—[The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business](#). (The latter was formerly known as AACSB—The International Association for Management Education.) In addition, the school itself is regionally accredited.

Professional accreditation is valued in the business world. Human resource professionals who are seeking applicants for prestigious jobs may only consider graduates from professionally and regionally accredited programs, Bear says. ■

Regional Accrediting Agencies

[Middle States Assoc. of Colleges and Schools](#)
[New England Assoc. of Schools and Colleges](#)
[North Central Assoc. of Colleges and Schools](#)
[Northwest Assoc. of Schools and Colleges](#)
[Southern Assoc. of Colleges and Schools](#)
[Western Assoc. of Schools and Colleges](#)

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"In fact, about two-thirds of all students drop out of distance learning programs for which the school and/or program is accredited by recognized agencies," says John Bear, PhD. A distance learning consultant for the FBI and a dozen universities, Bear is also the author or co-author of [seven books on distance learning](#).

Vicky Phillips, the chief executive officer of GetEducated.com, a distance education consulting firm in Essex Junction, Vermont, says the number of dropouts is closer to one-third for students who had attended a program for which the program and/or the school is accredited by a recognized agency. In comparison, about 25 percent of traditional age freshman students drop out.

Bear explains the high rate: "The main reason the drop-out rate is so high is because students don't realize how much work is involved and how much they will have to change their lifestyle: There are no shortcuts."

One physician who revamped his free time to earn an MBA is John Lowry, MD, a graduate of the one-year physicians-only MBA program at the [University of Tennessee's College of Business Administration](#) in Knoxville. The 40-year-old is the medical director for the women's outpatient clinics at the Kapiolani Medical Center for Women and Children in Honolulu and an assistant professor in the Department of obstetrics/gynecology at the University of Hawaii, also in Honolulu.

"It [studying for my MBA in 2000] was a very busy, tough year. It was probably one of the most challenging things I've done in my entire life. I would argue that it was even more challenging than medical school because of the amount of material that was covered in

such a short time," says Lowry.

Assuming that, like Lowry, you are willing to change your lifestyle, what is the next step? You may question whether a degree from an on-line program would be as accepted or respected as a degree from a traditional, on-campus program. Do the folks in a position to hire physicians differentiate between on-line and traditional degrees? Although there isn't a lot of research in this area, here are data from several important studies:

Since 1989, GetEducated's Phillips has conducted a biennial survey of approximately 5,000 human resources executives from such companies as IBM, FedEx, and AT&T. "Our results indicate that hiring managers differentiate between prestigious and non-prestigious colleges, but it is not important to them if a degree is earned on line," she says. "There isn't anything on the degree or transcript stating it was earned through distance learning, so as long as the school is a regionally accredited brick-and-mortar school, chances are the hiring manager will not ask if the degree was earned on line."

Rich Douglas, MBA inferred similar findings from his 2002 study. Douglas surveyed 267 hiring managers to determine employers' acceptance of various degrees and how employers are influenced by a school's accreditation. "What I found is that human resource professionals are not familiar with many schools and don't check them out. This means that holders of degrees from on-line programs won't get a lot of scrutiny about the nature of their degrees or the issuing schools," says Douglas, a corporate trainer and a PhD candidate at [Union Institute and University in Cincinnati](#). Douglas con-

ducted the survey for his dissertation.

In fact, Lowry says when he applied for the positions at the University of Hawaii and the women's outpatient clinics, no one inquired whether he had earned his degree on line. But suppose the hiring managers do realize that your degree was earned on line. Will they think it is just as credible as a degree from traditional institution?

This issue was addressed in a 2000 survey of 239 hiring managers and human resource professionals conducted by [Vault Inc.](#), a New York City-based company offering career information. Of the 239 respondents, 37 percent viewed an on-line graduate degree as credible as a traditional graduate degree; 54 percent viewed it not as credible but acceptable, and the remaining 9 percent found it to be not credible and unacceptable.

Analyzing the data from all her biennial studies, Phillips found that greater than 80 percent of the 5,000 participants viewed an on-line graduate degree as credible as a traditional degree as long as it was earned from a regionally accredited brick-and-mortar school.

There was another interesting finding from the Vault Inc. study: The researchers determined which industries are not likely to accept on-line degrees. Medicine was ranked first and health care/biotechnology third. The study's question on this topic did not specify a particular type of degree.

Evaluating a school's cost

Once you've decided to attend an on-line program, there are a number of factors to consider, including the program's accreditation (see "[All About Accreditation](#),") and cost.

Figuring out the cost can be tricky. Don't just compare the obvious: the

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cost per credit. That's only half the story because one MBA program may require 30 credits, while another is 54 credits. Your best bet is to ask the program's director for an estimate of the total cost. For example, the cost for the 36-credit on-line [MBA program at Bellevue University](#) in Bellevue, Nebraska, is approximately \$10,900. On the other hand, the cost for the 54-credit on-line [Executive MBA program at New York City's Pace University](#)'s is \$60,000, which includes the expenses associated with the program's 10 short residencies.

The cost of MPH programs varies as well. The on-line 80-unit [MPH degree at Johns Hopkins University](#) costs approximately \$45,120. The 36-credit on-line [MPH from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst](#) costs about \$18,000.

According to Bear, cost is not necessarily related to quality. "There are outstanding programs that are costly as well as ones that are inexpensive," he says.

Number of courses
required to graduate

Cost is only one variable to consider; another is the number of courses required to graduate. If you're considering an MBA but haven't taken any business coursework, you may need to take additional courses. For example, at [Marist College](#) in Poughkeepsie, New York, students without prior business coursework have to complete 51 credits to earn an MBA, whereas, some students who have completed business courses only have to complete 30 credits. On the other hand, all the students in Bellevue University's on-line MBA program have to complete 30 to 36 credits.

Bear cautions physicians to consider

Take a Look On Line

To learn more about on-line degrees, consider visiting these Web sites:

Degree.net, which is owned and maintained by Ten Speed Press, features information about John Bear's distance learning books www.degree.net

Peterson's Web site on distance learning www.petersons.com/distancelearning/

U.S. News & World Report: On-line Graduate Degree Web site www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/elearning/directory/gradonline.htm

GetEducated.com www.geteducated.com/

the number of prerequisites carefully: "The biggest stumbling block I have observed to earning an MBA is that students get bogged down in the prerequisites," he says.

Also, Bear says a program requiring more credits is not necessarily a better program: "MBA programs can be one year, two years, or three years—this doesn't mean a three-year program is three times better."

Considering that programs vary in terms of prerequisites and number of credits, it's not surprising that the content also varies. According to Bear, some on-line MBA programs have an international focus; others concentrate on business in the United States. Some programs emphasize math. Also, the concentrations vary widely. Some programs offer accounting while others offer health-care management.

For example, one reason Lowry chose his program is because the program focuses on health care and all the students are physicians. "Everything we discussed the entire year was related to health care. And that helps me in the job that I'm doing and that's what in-

terests me," he says.

Delivery mode

Another variable to consider is the way that the program's content is delivered. Phillips explains, "On-line learning is but one form of distance learning... Most distance degree programs use various delivery mechanisms," including mail, satellite, cable television, and videocassettes.

"For example, because the Internet does not deliver video well to home PC users, videotapes of lectures are often sent to students. After viewing the lectures, the students log on to the Internet to post discussion questions and answers on Internet bulletin boards," Phillips says.

If the Internet is the program's main delivery mode, physicians should inquire whether the program features synchronous or asynchronous classes or both. "Synchronous classes require that everyone is logged into the Web site at the same time, and students are participating in a virtual class room. For example, students might hear an audio presentation of a speaker in real time and then ask questions," says Douglas.

On the other hand, in asynchronous classes, students do not have to be logged in together at a specific time. Instead they do the work whenever it is convenient for them and the instructor controls the message traffic between the participants, Douglas says. "Keep in mind, if you ask the professor a question, it may be several days before you receive an answer," he says.

According to Douglas, "Some people need the structure of synchronous classes: 'I sign in every Wednesday at 6 p.m. and I do this.' Other people need the flexibility of asynchronous classes because they are very busy and their

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schedule varies.”

While studying for his MBA, Lowry completed most of the work asynchronously. However, once or twice a week, he met on line, in real time, with several other students to work on group assignments. The group “entered” a virtual classroom where they could type and speak to each other and also share documents and Microsoft PowerPoint slides.

Furthermore, every Saturday morning, all the students in the program met on line for a real-time three-hour class. While speaking, the lecturer would change the PowerPoint slides on the students’ computers. During the lecture, each student could raise a “virtual hand” and ask a question, in real time, to the professor or to the entire group.

Overall, Lowry says that he interacted with the students and professors just as much as he would have in a traditional program.

Residency requirement

Another important consideration is whether the program has a residency requirement. That’s right, some on-line programs require that students spend time on campus taking exams,

studying, or fulfilling other responsibilities. Not surprisingly, residency requirements vary. Some require that students study at the campus during predetermined periods; others allow students to choose when they will study onsite.

Green says, “One of the reasons I chose Johns Hopkins is because the onsite requirement could be met in short segments. They offer quite a few courses through their summer and winter institutes. I actually found it [the onsite requirement] quite convenient and spent two weeks each summer there.

“I really enjoyed the onsite. I think that a program that was exclusively on line that didn’t include any face-to-face interaction would be missing something,” says Green.

New jobs

Both Green and Lowry credit their new degrees with helping them land new jobs. Green was appointed to a full-time faculty position at Queens University in Kingston, Ontario, starting in the summer of 2003. Armed with his new knowledge and skills, Green says he feels well prepared for his new job, where his responsibilities will include conducting research and

analyzing policy. Without an MPH degree, Green says he probably would not have been hired.

Lowry was hired as an assistant professor at the department of ob/gyn at the University of Hawaii in Honolulu. In this position, which is tailor-made for an MD-MBA, he teaches courses on the business aspect of medicine. “The MBA got me the position. No question about it,” he says.

Furthermore, Lowry was able to use his business knowledge and skills to improve the finances of the women’s outpatient clinics at the Kapiolani Medical Center Women. “The skills I learned from the MBA helped me turn around the finances completely. We aren’t making money yet, but we are near the break-even point for the first time in over five years,” he says.

Reflecting on the overall experience of earning his MBA, Lowry concludes, “I really enjoyed it. I felt it was a life-changing program.” ■

Liz Lipton, who resides in Kingston, NY, has been a free-lance writer for 14 years. She holds a master’s degree in journalism. Lipton also is a consultant with Glazer Medical Solutions and an assistant editor for The Bulletin, published by the New York State Psychiatric Association.