Using Your Distance Education to Earn an Academic Degree

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In 2000, 43 percent of undergraduates were of nontraditional college age (24 years or older). Eighty percent were employed, including 39 percent who were employed full time. Today, experts believe that nearly three out of four adults are taking some kind of training. This increase is due in part to the growing number of programs that provide an alternative to the traditional classroom approach. These programs and increased access to information about educational opportunities have given many adults a second chance to acquire the knowledge and skills that may have seemed out of reach in the past.

With this increased opportunity to participate in adult and continuing education programs, however, comes the challenge of determining exactly how to use programs such as distance education to earn an academic degree or obtain other educational goals. Many people have asked: “What can I do to earn a degree using my distance education? How can my work done at a distance education institution be translated into a college degree?” These and other questions are addressed below.

Q. Can I earn credit toward an academic degree from a residential college by combining my various types of learning outside the traditional classroom?
A. Yes, provided this learning is college-level and can be assessed and fashioned into a degree program at an accredited college or university.

Q. Will an accredited college or university accept my nontraditional learning?
A. This depends. Your nontrad-
tional learning may not easily “fit” into the major course of study you choose. For instance, if you want to major in Business Administration and your distance education courses are in Electronics, they are not likely to be accepted by college as part of your major area of study. On the other hand, your electronics courses may be applied towards a minor concentration, the general education requirement, or an elective area.

Q. How many semester credits do I need to complete my degree?
A. Typically, colleges require approximately 60 semester credits for the completion of an associate degree and approximately 120 semester credits for the completion of a baccalaureate degree.

Q. How do colleges learn of these ACE credit recommendations?
A. Often adult learners will request that an ACE Transcript be sent directly to the college or university for credit acceptance (see ACE Transcript at http://www.acenet.edu/cll/corporate/transcript.cfm). In addition, these credit recommendations are published annually in The National Guide to Educational Credit for Training Programs (see resource listing). ACE provides an individual advocacy service to adult learners who have successfully completed courses or programs at DETC accredited schools and who experience difficulty getting credit recommendations accepted. ACE will telephone or write to the college on behalf of the DETC graduate.

Q. How do I know if some of the courses I have taken carry ACE college credit recommendations?
A. Simply log onto the Online ACE Transcript System at: https://www.acenet.edu/transcripts/ or you may contact the ACE Call Center, which is open M-F 8:45 a.m. - 4:45 p.m. and can be reached at 202-939-9434. Staff are able to assist you with courses that carry ACE credit recommendations for both civilian organizations and training obtained through the military.

Q. I keep hearing about accredited colleges or universities. But what is accreditation?
A. Accreditation is a voluntary process used by the academic and professional communities to ensure the quality and integrity of an institution or program. Most colleges and universities are accredited by one of six regional accrediting bodies recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). Because accreditation assures educational quality, the transfer of academic credit from one institution to another is heavily dependent upon it, but not guaranteed by it. Accreditation of distance education schools is similar to regional accreditation. It is a voluntary, non-governmental, institution-wide process attesting to the quality and integrity of a school and its programs.

Q. How can I be assured that I am not getting “ripped off” by taking a distance education course or program?
A. Accreditation by the Accrediting Commission of the Distance Education and Training Council or by other recognized accrediting agencies is your best assurance. The American Council on Education annually publishes a directory, which lists accredited schools, colleges, and universities, entitled Accredited Institutions of Postsecondary Education (see resource listing).

Q. Besides resident colleges, are there other kinds of institutions that make use of distance education and other nontraditional learning approaches?
A. Yes. There are a number of institutions that offer flexible programs or external degrees. An external degree is an academic program offered by an accredited institution, which requires that fewer than 25 percent of the degree requirements be campus-based, and which provides mechanisms or acquiring and evaluating off-campus learning. In many cases, these institutions award degrees in some fields based entirely upon nontraditional study. Distance education is one way a student can accomplish this. Consult The Adult Learner’s Guide to Alternative and External Degree Programs (see resource listing).

Q. Are there reputable institutions with graduate degrees, which recognize distance education programs?
A. Yes. To find out which institutions recognize distance education programs, consult The Adult Learner’s Guide to Alternative and External Degree Programs (see resource listing). This directory lists graduate and undergraduate programs designed to meet the needs of nontraditional learners.

Q. Can my CEUs (Continuing Education Units) be applied toward an academic degree?
A. Not usually. The CEU is used to recognize and measure participation in non-credit learning activities. The CEU is defined as “ten contract hours of participation in an organized, continuing education experience under responsible sponsorship, capable direction, and qualified instruction.” CEUs are valuable, however, when used to meet workplace professional development requirements.

Q. If I choose not to pursue a de-