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A “correspondence course” once carried the dubious distinction of providing an education based on mail-order lesson packages, the kind offered by obscure institutes that ran tiny ads in the back of magazines shouting: Become a legal secretary in the privacy of your own home! Learn to write best-selling novels in your spare time! Teach yourself how to sell anything to anybody! Presumably those courses appealed to people who could not afford time for traditional classes or who lived in remote areas far from colleges or vocational schools. Mail may have been their only alternative, but established institutions were not interested in entering the world of long-distance, packaged education. The Internet is changing that. Training and education has always been a primary strategy for career advancement, and the Internet is becoming not just a supplement to traditional academic programs, but an alternative to them as well. It brings learning to people’s fingertips, without regard for how far someone may be from a school or how many other people are interested in the same class. Distance education, while not completely replacing the traditional college experience, is an excellent way to take college courses because of the time constraints facing many people today. One example is Farzad Naeim, an earthquake engineer from California. He decided to go to law school, but didn?t have time for campus meetings and classroom lectures. When he found out he could get his education through the Internet, he enrolled. Explaining the convenience he said, “I figure if I go to a standard school four nights a week, that eliminates the chance for me to see my kids grow up. I get my assignments off the computer, and I can study after the kids go to bed” (McQueen). Naeim is not the only one taking advantage of this opportunity. Many are taking advantage of this option over traditional classroom learning. Most adult learners, who every year make up a larger proportion of the college population, have busy schedules to juggle with family responsibilities and demanding careers. Speaking about this group of adult learners, Kathy McGuire, the director of Distance Learning at the U.C.L.A. Extension, a continuing education program affiliated with the University of California in Los Angeles, explained, “They?re not going to stop learning, but they?re not going to want to drive all over the place to do it” (Newman). The appeal of using the Internet to pursue an education is its flexibility and convenience. Right now, about 26,000 courses online teach approximately 750,000 students (McQueen). But is a seat in front of a computer as good as a seat in a college classroom? According to a report by the Institute for Higher Education Policy, colleges still lack enough knowledge about Internet-based education to justify its rapid growth (McQueen). Ed Neal, the director of Faculty Development in the Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, noted a difference between adult learners, who form the traditional market for distance education, and adolescent learners. These two groups differ in motivation, purpose, learning styles and preferences, and intellectual skills (Neal). A web site at Western Governor?s University (http://www.wgu.edu) includes a “self-assessment quiz” that is very instructive in this matter. After taking the quiz of multiple choice questions, an explanation of the implications of different responses are displayed. Some comments warn that “if face-to-face interaction is very important to you, think carefully before enrolling in a distance-delivered class,” and “because you won’t be sitting in a classroom on a regular basis and won’t have your instructor or classmates nearby to remind you of assignments, you must be fairly self-directed and conscientious about completing assignments to succeed in a distance-delivered class” (Neal). Not many students coming out of high school may be “self-directed and conscientious about completing assignments” and many traditional aged college students still require ample and frequent feedback on assignments. It is clear that this type of learning environment may not be for everyone. Another matter to consider, especially for those students and parents of students graduating high school and thinking of distance education is the experience that the traditional college experience brings. Dylan Tweney, a content development manager for Infoworld and writer about the Internet since 1993, explained, “The efficient acquisition of knowledge is only a tiny fraction of what going to college means. Face-to-face interaction with professors, living away from one’s parents, and socializing with a diverse group of people count for a lot in college education — and these experiences can’t be replicated online” (Tweney). In my own personal experience with distance education classes through the Internet, I have found them to be challenging. I have taken many classes in an actual college classroom and on the Internet. For different courses I have even had the same instructor both in a classroom and online. I have found that much relies on the instructor?s organization and planning as well as the readability of the textbook. It is certainly not a ?read this chapter and take a quiz? type of environment. Weekly lectures are typed and postings to discussion groups are required. Some courses even have synchronous “chat” meetings to simulate classroom discussion and interaction. It certainly not a watered-down education by any means. The flexibility of taking classes online helps me to juggle my work, family and other responsibilities without tying up scheduled blocks of time in a classroom. Using the Internet to take college courses is an option that now allows people to have access to get additional training and learn the skills needed in today?s job market. The convenience and flexibility of working on assignments at 7 a.m. on a Sunday morning or 11 p.m. on a Wednesday night opens up an opportunity that was, for some people, previously impossible before. In most cases, online courses cannot completely replace the interaction and the experience of traditional classroom learning. But, if the option is either going to college online or not going at all, the benefits of receiving a quality education through the Internet pale in comparison to alternative of doing nothing at all.

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