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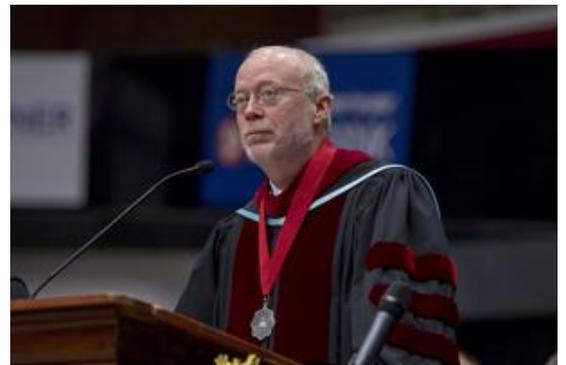
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# 7 tips for making your best choice in an online university education program

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Prospective undergraduate and graduate students evaluating online programs should consider many variables beyond education and course credits. Here are seven tips for finding the best option for you offered by Ben Leslie, interim president of Gardner-Webb University, and Emily Robertson, Gardner-Webb's director of digital learning.



Ben Leslie, interim president of Gardner-Webb University.

- 1. Have a goal before you start searching.** Before scouring the internet for online programs that pique your interest or selecting a college with an interesting major, have a clear understanding of your own educational goals. Once you contact an institution, you will be exposed to “sales forces” who will try to convince you that their product is the best—even if better options exist.
- 2. Is the online program accredited by the same organization as the on-campus program?** Accreditation means that an institution meets the minimal standards set forth

by an independent agency, usually the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools for universities in North Carolina, and is not necessarily a mark of excellence. The lack of mirroring accreditation for an online program could be a potential red flag, suggesting that the product is inferior to that offered on-campus. Potential employers will take notice of the difference, and you should as well.

**3. Check on the agency awarding the accreditation.** Those interested in pursuing an online education should also make sure that the accreditation agency itself is legitimate, meaning it has been recognized by either the U.S. Department of Education or the Council on Higher Education Accreditation. Institutions lacking true accreditation are often referred to as “diploma mills,” and potential employers will want to ensure that their new hires earned their degrees from a legitimate online institution.

**4. Be prepared to invest money on your personal computer.** Before registering, closely review an online program’s technical requirements, and then take an inventory of your personal technology. Unless you already own a relatively new laptop or desktop computer, as well as webcams and other required interfacing software, be ready to upgrade your personal computer. Also, tablets and cellphones are not recommended options for online students.

**5. How does the online program verify that the person taking an online test is that person?** Some colleges require that midterms and final exams be proctored by a real person, meaning that online students must drive to a designated testing center, usually a college’s main or satellite campus. However, those schools usually make special arrangements for those who live out of state or too far from a designated testing site. In other instances, online students can take their required exams at home but at designated times so they can be monitored by professors watching via webcams. Some colleges hire outside firms, like ProctorU, to oversee testing. Finally, some colleges employ biometric authentication software, like that offered by Proctortrack, to verify the identity of students when they enter the online testing room.

**6. Always apply for scholarships and financial aid.** A common misnomer among online students is thinking that they no longer qualify for scholarships, or state and federal aid. The fact is that most online students — depending on their specific situation and income levels — still qualify for financial assistance and, unlike their on-campus counterparts, can apply for awards that are exclusively intended for students who never step foot on a college campus.

**7. When a degree is only part of the equation.** Some careers, such as elementary

education and nursing, require licensing in addition to degrees, so students pursuing those paths are better off enrolling in an online program that will assist them in securing both. Leslie says the ideal colleges for these students are those that meld the two fields, simultaneously teaching students what they need to know to do their job, while guiding them through the licensing application process.

*Learn more about Gardner-Webb's online program offerings.*

*Gardner-Webb University has steadily grown its academic programs, online offerings, physical campus, and community relationships to become a nationally-recognized leader in Christian higher education. It is located in Boiling Springs, North Carolina.*