

BRIGHTLIGHTS

[Tony Huffman ('96)]

Alumnus finds his niche in online education

BY HARRY ATWOOD ('87)

For some people the words "online education" evoke negative impressions. Perhaps such impressions are rooted in the notion that teachers will one day be obsolete. Perhaps some skepticism comes from a perception that degrees from for-profit institutions with Ivy-Leagueish names seem tainted with marketing stratagems and conflicts of interest and thereby must produce an inferior educational experience.

Then there are the cringe-worthy ads on television where students (often girls in pajamas) sing boastfully about bypassing the rigors of traditional education while comfortably perched on a couch with an open laptop.

For Tony Huffman ('96) founder and CEO of Approved Colleges, this trope of the indolent pajamas-all-day slacker attaining an inferior degree is a pernicious stereotype. The headquarters of Huffman's company (an ecommerce, web-directory business specializing in online education services) is located on West Bruce Street in downtown Harrisonburg. The entrepreneur is energetic and exudes a confidence befitting a man who has launched his business and seen it through three rounds of investment. With more than 13 years experience in the online education business, Huffman feels his company is poised to capitalize on a rapidly growing market.

Founded in 2012, Approved Colleges employs 10 and offers a variety of services, including access to a database of online education products in the forms of degrees, courses and assessments. The site is host to some 2,000 online schools and features more than 15,000 online degrees.

"Ten years ago there were only a handful of schools offering online programs; now there are thousands," Huffman says. In such a burgeoning market, customers will benefit from resources that best help them make sense of it all. Huffman believes Approved Colleges will be one of the premier resources.

Huffman acknowledges there are some misconceptions about online education and ruefully agrees that some for-profit institutions with low enrollment standards give the industry a bad name. He is quick to add, however, that more and more universities are embracing online education and much has been done to police deceptive practices. "To be listed on Approved Colleges, schools have to be accredited by an agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education," he says. He also points out that there are many academic and business applications for online education. "It's more than just online degrees," he says. "It's online courses, training, professional development and assessments."

A JMU Perspective

James Shaeffer, former JMU associate vice provost for outreach and engagement, shares Huffman's enthusiasm for distance learning, and is proud of JMU's growing involvement in the field. "It used to be that most of JMU's online offerings were targeted at students at home for the summer. That is changing," Shaeffer is particularly proud of the online components JMU has initiated in the adult degree program. He explains, "For most students they have completed two years and have two more years to go. What we've done is to put enough courses online so that a student can complete the final two years online." One of the newest online initiatives is the R.N. to B.S.N. program offered fully online to working nurses. JMU also offers a Masters in Speech Pathology online. "The online student is, by and large, different from the traditional student," Shaeffer adds. "There are lots of reasons someone might need online education. Think of the student who has learned a skill in a local community college to get a job and then later decides to further his degree or to

pursue a new career. As a public institution we have a moral obligation to reach out to those students."

Shaeffer talks of online education as a new and powerful tool with a wide range of potential applications. "As in any field, you want to exploit the strengths of any delivery system," he says. Shaeffer points out that many courses at JMU are becoming hybrids (also known as flipped classrooms) with a mix of traditional classroom experiences with online lecture features. Amongst those using the flipped classroom approach are four JMU physics faculty members in the Physics 240 and 250 courses.

One of the advantages of online education is the greater control students have over the pacing of their education. "Take a content-dense class like pharmacology," Shaeffer says. "An online course can facilitate a more thorough understanding of subjects by allowing for review time that real-time education may not."

The Quality Question

Clearly not all online programs are equal. "As in anything, it's buyer beware," Shaeffer warns. "We've had people come to JMU, and we had to tell them the credits they attained from a certain institution do not meet our requirements." Fortunately, the regional accreditation bodies vet online programs with the same standards used in accrediting traditional courses. JMU's traditional and online programs fall under the auspices of The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

Online education is a remarkable resource; but it's not to say that distance learning is a panacea. Even Shaeffer who talks glowingly about the value of online education notes that JMU takes a cautious approach. "JMU is not going to go after everything," he says. Before promoting any online program JMU wants to know three things, according to Shaeffer: 1) Is there a recognized need? 2) What can JMU



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bring that is unique; and 3) Will the product be of a quality befitting the JMU brand?

It is a remarkable thing that education can be delivered at a distance (even all the way across the globe). However, distance can imply detachment. It is not misplaced fear to be concerned with the consequences of the growing detachment between students, where more and more of the collaborative discourse takes place in the sterile boxes of course message boards instead of through the visceral communication that occurs between people

in the same place and same time looking each other in the eye. (Learn more about how JMU is sustaining the “humanity” of education on Page 26.)

Business Applications

Although online degree offerings are a major part of Approved College's business model, Huffman is equally committed to corporate education, which he claims is a \$150-billion industry. “We've dedicated half of our resources and focus to corporate education,” he says. He explains that online education can assist companies in many ways. For example, with a vast array of courses available, companies can train their employees in specific skill sets. Businesses, big and small, can screen potential employees for competence through skill assessment tests. Approved Colleges helps businesses take their own training materials and put them in an easily accessible online format.

Huffman is optimistic that the economic recovery will prove timely for Approved Colleges. “The recession caused so many businesses to eliminate corporate training and tuition reimbursement programs.” As things improve, he expects to see some bounce back.

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