

gree, may I still obtain college credit for my distance education work?

A. Yes. Some colleges will evaluate learning and award credit for it whether or not an individual enrolls in a degree program. These credits will be put on a transcript and become a permanent achievement record of college-level learning.

Q. Suppose I don't elect to apply my distance education courses toward a college degree or credit. Will an employer still make use of my work?

A. It depends, but usually yes. In most cases, your employer who assesses your level of competence for a particular job or to move you into a higher job category will likely consider your distance education courses. In fact, in a study by DETC, 100 percent of the supervisors who responded to the survey said that: (a) they felt that distance education degree graduates performed better on the job as a result of their degrees; and (b) a person receiving a distance education degree compared favorably in terms of knowledge learned by someone with a resident degree.

As you pursue your educational goals, it is important to remember that an academic degree can be earned in ways other than by attending a resident college. Tens of thousands of adults have successfully earned legitimate degrees with little or no classroom attendance. The options are many; the choice is yours!

Useful resources:

- Johnson, Jacqueline E., Robinson, Jo Ann, and Welch, Sally R. *Pocket Guide to College Credits and Degrees*, 2004, American Council on Education.

- Robinson, Jo Ann, Polite, Troy, and Taylor, Jacqueline E. (Ed.) 2003/2004, *The National Guide to Educational Credit for Training Programs*; Washington, DC: American Council on Education's bookstore (Item No: 309517).

- Kenneth VonAlt (Ed.) 2002-2003: *Accredited Institutions of Postsecondary Education*; Washington DC: American Council on Education, from Greenwood Publishing Group: <http://www.greenwood.com>).

- The 2002 *Guide to the Evaluation of Education Experiences in the Armed Services*; Washington DC: American Council on Education's bookstore.

- Stewart, D., Sullivan, Eugene, and Spille, H., *External Degrees in the Information Age: Legitimate Choices*, 1997, American Council on Education's bookstore (ISBN 0-89774-997-9).

- Robinson, Jo Ann, Polite, Troy, and Taylor, Jacqueline E. (Ed.) 2003/2004 *Guide to Educational Credit by Examination*, Washington, DC: American Council on Education's bookstore (Item no: 309518).

- *DETC Directory of Accredited Institutions*, Washington, DC: Distance Education and Training Council, 1601 18th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20009; <http://www.detc.org>.

Note: For ACE's publications call 301-632-6757 or visit their Web Site at <http://www.acenet.edu/bookstore>.

(Published March 2004 by the Distance Education and Training Council, 1601 18th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20009-2529, www.detc.org.)

Using Your Distance Education to Earn an Academic Degree

by
JoAnn Robinson,
Director, College Credit
Recommendation Service
American Council on Education



Jo Ann Robinson

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 edu-

cation 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 nontradi-

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 I know that a college will accept my learning?*

A. You need to contact the registrar or dean at a college who typically makes the decision to accept distance education work or other nontraditional learning. Many colleges use “portfolio assessment,” which provides another way for them to evaluate learning.

Q. *How can I better my chances of getting my distance education work or other nontraditional learning accepted at a college?*

A. There are various procedures in place, which make a favorable decision more likely. For example, when requested by the institution, the American Council on Education’s College Credit Recommendation Service reviews courses offered by Distance Education and Training Council (DETC) schools and, based on a team of college faculty members’ evaluations, makes credit

recommendations for the courses. These evaluations ascertain that the learning acquired through distance education courses is comparable to that acquired through courses offered on a traditional college campus.

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/cill/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 that 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-*