



ONLINE LEARNING

- *Is it for real?*

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I've responded to the same comments daily since I was hired to chair the criminal justice program at Concordia University, St. Paul where police officers and other criminal justice practitioners can earn a fully accredited bachelor's or master's degree all online allowing them to balance self, home, work and college.

Online Learning Myths

- **It's not real school and can't be as good.**
- **It's an impersonal correspondence school.**
- **Employers don't accept it.**

This article is intended to introduce online learning to those considering returning to college and those either hiring people with degrees earned online or considering requests from employees to attend school this way. First, I don't like the term "distance education" because it implies a disconnect that doesn't exist. Although there is plenty, I will not bore you with research that proves online is not only pedagogically sound (teacher talk for "it's legit") but can be even better for adults wanting to return to college and maintain balance in a life far more complicated than for the traditional 18 year old student.

The resistance to change is human nature. There was a chief with a law degree who was so enthused when I asked him to teach until he realized the classes were online and then took a defensive stance with one foot behind the other and his hands in front of him warding off any impending attack proclaiming, "I've got to see the whites of their eyes in class!" Or the lieutenant who was so enthused with the benefits until he realized how innovative it was, confessing, "This sounds too good to be true; it just doesn't pass the smell test. I can't change what I'm used to even though I didn't like it!"

Joel Barker, internationally renowned futurist and change consultant to such agencies as NASA, defines inability to change with the times as a "terminal disease of certainty."

"Of course the biggest critics of online learning are those who have never taken a course this way. Sure it's different, but that doesn't mean it's somehow less.

In fact, the reason almost every major university is offering classes online is because it works."

—Cheri Frandrup, Minnesota State Patrol Captain

I get the question from both prospective students and their employers, "Is this for real?" Yes, it's very much for real. As State Patrol Major Kent O'Grady states, "Chiefs who ignore the opportunities provided by online learning will find other agencies will be reaping the benefits of this tool and will be attracting the best and the brightest leaders for the future." BCA Superintendent (ret.) Linda Finney, an online Concordia professor adds, "I was initially a skeptic; but after my first few sessions as an instructor, I found I had more personal interaction with individual students than I could ever have in the classroom. Also the convenience and accessibility for students and instructors can't be beat."

One misconception is the technology is what sets online learning apart. Not so; in fact, two basic premises online learning is built upon are:

- Learning is a process, not a place; and,
- Learning is something you do, not somewhere you go.

Elk River Chief Jeff Beahan says, "Although many may question the legitimacy of online education, my daily work is the best example of how successful my learning experience was. I have spent over 30 years sitting in chairs in various educational facilities, including those administrative places of higher education designed specifically for police administrators. Yet it is mostly the online education I draw upon almost every working day as a chief. Whether it is the relevancy of what I learned or how I learned, it is the most valuable educational experience I've had."

Actually, the most elementary aspect of it is the technology itself. The computer is simply used as a means of conveying information, not unlike an overhead projector or video player in a classroom. And if a person can send an e-mail and run a registration they're overqualified to function in the online learning environment, it's that easy.

What makes online learning so desirable is a combination of making school doable and accessible. Traditional school is designed so young people can not only earn a degree but become more independent and develop social relationships. Online learning allows the adult student to focus on the education. I view online learning as "distilled education," offering everything a person needs to learn without the constraints of extraneous factors.

With online learning you only get what you need. Lectures are written and downloaded when it suits the learner (maybe on a night shift break or after the kids are down). Class discussion takes place on discussion boards where the professor lists questions that students reply to directly as well as to the postings of others, also when convenient to be at a computer. Assignments are exchanged between students and faculty by e-mail and once a week the entire class meets at the same time for a group live chat to make sure everyone's on the same page, discuss some substantive questions and keep people connected.

The schedule required of traditional education adds a hurdle that's insurmountable to many in criminal justice. "The flexibility offered by online learning has made it possible for me to further my criminal justice education. Without the online learning opportunity, I would not have been able to enroll back into school," says Minneapolis police officer Andy Stender.

Throughout the week students and faculty are e-mailing back and forth as well. This is anything but impersonal. In fact, almost all online students report getting to know one another and their instructors better than they ever did in a face-to-face class because of these personal interactions. And it is not self directed, there's a schedule students have to maintain. An accelerated program, like Concordia's, is very fast paced.

Another benefit of online learning is that students come from anywhere there is Internet access. Concordia's program has students from all over the United States and Canada. It's networking at its best. Imagine interacting during class with fellow students like Sgt. Brian Tremperer (Oakland California PD and vice president of the National Latino Officers Assn.), Capt. Darryl Winston (Milwaukee Wisconsin PD), Sgt. Ray Mattix (Ft. Worth, Texas, ret.) and Indiana Boot Camp Commander Jenni Walker, all in addition to others from throughout Minnesota? Online learning allows students to continue their education when away for any reason. We've even had students continue school while deployed in war zones.

True, some programs have been exposed for the frauds they are. But accredited schools are required to have their online programs meet the very same requirements the face-to-face classes do. That's why degrees from these schools carry the same prestige as any other degree they award and don't say, "But only earned online." For example, online criminal justice students at Concordia earn the very same degree the institution has been awarding since 1893.

Online learning can no longer be considered a novelty. In fact, the State of Michigan has passed a law requiring all high school students to take at least one class online to better prepare them for future schooling and the workplace. Maybe like squad cars instead of horses, radios instead of call boxes, women becoming officers and community oriented policing, criminal justice will eventually accept this innovation as well.

University of Minnesota Police Detective Jim Nystrom summarizes his online experience during which he earned both is B.A. and M.A. degrees, "Life and schoolwork coexisted virtually seamlessly and that is important. You do not have to disappear into an educational crevasse in order to do this . . . you can continue to do all those things you do in your life and still complete the program."



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For further information on Concordia University, St. Paul's online criminal justice degree, please visit www.csp.edu/cj or contact program recruiter Mike Conner (conner@csp.edu) or criminal justice program chair, Scott Harr (harr@csp.edu).