

mastering business LONG DISTANCE

Online MBA programs allow busy managers and far-flung students to



IT'S MIDNIGHT. After a busy day meeting with clients, Aaron Woods is back in his motel room in Montreal. Instead of turning on the TV, he logs onto the Internet, and then he's in class — "Principled Decision Making" — at Oregon's Marylhurst University, 2,000 miles away.

Woods is simultaneously pursuing his master's degree in business administration *and* his career at Xerox, where he's director of the Office Printing Business Service Alliance. That Wilsonville-based job takes him to Canada one week, Chicago the next, but as long as he has a computer and an Internet hookup, he doesn't have to make up a single class.

Woods finished his undergraduate degree at Marylhurst a few years ago and decided to keep going. He hopes to get his MBA by next spring. In today's world, he says, the seasoned executive needs a graduate degree to understand global business and to grasp the broad spectrum of management issues. Without distance learning, "it would have been extremely difficult to complete in the time I did," he says. "The Internet option gave me the flexibility I needed."

MOST OREGON UNIVERSITIES have begun to incorporate some Internet courses in their programs. But only three — Marylhurst, Portland State (PSU) and Concordia — have fully shifted their MBA programs onto the Web. Those schools have launched 21st-century versions of the old correspondence class — with all the

links, chats and real-time options of the Internet.

Marylhurst has students who have never been to its campus south of Portland. They can take every class in the program online, come to evening and weekend classes on campus or do some of both. Marylhurst's 140 MBA students have an average age of 36, most work full-time and many, like Woods, could not earn their degrees any other way. Bert Desmond, chair of the graduate business and management program, says those characteristics of maturity and focus give the students superior discipline and a strong commitment to succeed.

PSU also offers its entire program online now, but in a different format. In the school's eMBA program, which started last fall, students are required to attend three or four weekend residencies a year, in addition to their work online. Of PSU's 400 students, 30 have chosen the online option so far. Half live in the Portland metro area, while the rest are scattered in cities around the state, including Bend, Coos Bay, Salem, Klamath Falls, La Grande, Eugene and Corvallis.

Director Tom Luba says PSU opted for the online format after enrollment started dropping in fall 2000 — partly due to the recession, partly due to competitors offering MBAs online. PSU's program already had a distance learning component with videotaped courses offered around the state, but students still had to meet at a specific time and place every week to participate. Luba says working adults with busy travel schedules

and other obligations needed more flexibility. "We went back to the drawing board and redesigned the program."

At Concordia, students meet one weekend a month on the Portland campus to work together on Harvard Business School cases with input from industry representatives. Between residencies, the students participate in live chats and discussions online. Industry experts often sit in, providing real-world commentary, says Ann Widmer, dean of the school of management. Students also bring their own expertise. "Every time you have a course, two

Luba. "But they were concerned about the financial end of it, the workload and things like intellectual property rights."

Ann Widmer says going online was complicated and expensive for Concordia. "Anybody who thinks this is a cheap, easy way to do this is in for a real shock. It's more faculty time than actually going to class and teaching it."

STUDENTS AREN'T COMPLETELY SOLD on Internet programs either. Don Schofield, chief operating officer of AAA Oregon and a recent Marylhurst MBA graduate, took some online classes but didn't think the cyber-version was as good as being there. He felt

take classes without attending school. **By Sue Fagalde Lick**

or three people in the course are already working in that field."

NOT ALL EDUCATORS are eager to go all-online. Julianna Sowash, executive director of the Oregon Executive MBA program, says Internet-based classes are not even on the horizon for her program, which offers a business degree through a consortium that includes professors from the University of Oregon, Oregon State and PSU.

Peer learning is just too important, Sowash says. Students, who must be working at the managerial level to qualify, are grouped in cohorts that go through the whole case-based program together, meeting on alternate Fridays and Saturdays in Beaverton. Teamwork, role playing and live presentations are essential. She says it would never work as well on the Internet.

Larry Lewis, dean of the school of business at the University of Portland, says he isn't considering long-distance classes either right now. "We are convinced that a face-to-face interactive class is the better way to go. We can do a better job." Enrollments at UP are increasing, Lewis says, showing that students still want a campus-based program.

And going online is no cakewalk. "Offering an Internet-based program requires a tremendous learning curve on the part of the school," Lewis says.

No one who's tried it disagrees.

"Teaching online is very different," says Mike Randolph, who trains new online teachers for Marylhurst. "If you taught in the classroom for 20 years, you have to reinvent yourself." Course materials need to be communicated online, so professors have to be more organized than they would be in the classroom. After all, every word of every lecture, every reading and every link has to be entered and formatted.

Another difference is that the class is always in session. "It can be a very guilt-driven environment," says Marylhurst's Bert Desmond. He says he's learned to set boundaries on when he will read, post and chat online. Otherwise, students start to think they should have access to the professor 24 hours a day.


Faculty was hesitant to embrace the Internet-based MBA at PSU. "It wasn't that they were anti-distance learning or anti-online learning," says director Tom

that reading every e-mail in an online discussion was a waste of time, and thought some of his professors weren't as effective online as in person.

As an employer reviewing job candidates, Schofield says he would probably give the edge to an on-campus MBA graduate, although it would depend on the overall reputation of the school.

Scott Bolton, who started his MBA at Marylhurst before he lost his job as a Portland-based director of government and regulatory affairs for Enron, is confident his degree will have value in the job market. "How can online education seem so strange in a business environment filled with conference calls, video applications, websites and e-mail?" he asks.

Opinions about MBAs still depend more on the school than the medium, says Widmer. "I think there will always be a kind of status to going to a prestigious school. Having a Stanford MBA will always be great. People tend to say, 'Where did you go to school?' not, 'Tell me about the format.'"

Widmer doesn't think online degrees will replace the on-campus version. "I wouldn't ever want us to be an industry where we only had one product, where everyone had to buy it the same way. The availability of all these different products is really good. It allows more people to become educated." 

Sue Fagalde Lick lives in Newport and is pursuing an online master of fine arts degree in creative nonfiction from Antioch University in Los Angeles.

If you have comments, e-mail us at feedback@oregonbusiness.com.

GETTING AN MBA WITHOUT BEING THERE

- **Concordia University:** Students take classes online and meet on campus one weekend a month to hear industry speakers and work on Harvard Business School cases. 800.321.9371, www.cu-portland.edu
- **Marylhurst University:** Students can take all courses over the Internet or take a mixture of online, evening and weekend classes. 800.634.9982, www.marylhurst.edu
- **Portland State University:** eMBA students come to campus three or four weekends a year and do the rest online. 503.725.4822, www.emba.pdx.edu
- **Geteducated.com:** Offers a free downloadable guide to accredited distance-learning graduate schools in the United States. www.geteducated.com
- **Oregon Network for Education:** Offers information on distance-education programs across the state. www.oregonone.org