

Obtaining an Accredited SH&E Related Degree through Online Learning

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Introduction

Working adults have had limited practical opportunities to obtain a safety, health and environmental (SH&E) related bachelor's (BS) degree or master's (MS) degree from an accredited institution. However, there has been a proliferation of quality online learning degree options from accredited institutions over the last decade. According to a recent study of 2,200 colleges and universities published by the Sloan Consortium, "nearly 3.2 million students took at least one online course during the fall 2005 term", an 800,000 student increase from the previous year (Allen 1). In addition, the study showed that "more than 96% of the largest institutions (more than 15,000 total enrollments) had some online offerings" (Allen 2).

The quality of accredited online degrees has been found to be as good as or even better than the quality of traditional degree programs. The Sloan Consortium study found that 62% of academic leaders "rated online learning outcomes as the same or superior to those in face to face" (Allen 2). Gene Maeroff (2004, 30) with Columbia University stated that "online learning is no less legitimate than the actual classroom...it simply calls for a different mode of delivery." This is great news for working adults who want to obtain a degree from an accredited institution but have been unable to do so through traditional means.

Benefits of an SH&E-Related Degree

There are many benefits from obtaining an accredited SH&E-related degree. In today's work environment of downsizing, rightsizing, acquisitions and mergers it is imperative that SH&E professionals manage their careers and ensure that they have the credentials to stay employed or find SH&E employment. It is becoming more difficult, if not almost impossible, to obtain an SH&E related job without an SH&E related degree. In most cases employers are looking for an SH&E related BS degree and some are requiring an MS degree or listing one as preferred. Many of those who have come into the SH&E field without an SH&E related degree have found it difficult to get promoted or make a job change without an SH&E related degree. In addition, many working SH&E professionals with an SH&E related BS degree have found that they need an MS degree to be considered for a promotion or move into a management position.

Salary levels of SH&E professionals are dependent upon many factors; however, salary surveys have consistently shown that education plays a significant role. The 2006 SH&E salary survey

conducted by National Safety Council's Health + Safety magazine found that "19% of those with advanced degrees earned" \$100,000 or greater and 5% earned over \$150,000 as compared to only 1% and 0% respectively of those who had some college (Parker 45). In addition, the survey found that 50% of those with only a high school degree made less than \$50,000 and the "highest percentage" of those with a four year degree made between \$70,000 and \$79,000 (Parker 45). A 2003 compensation survey conducted by the American Society of Safety Engineers had similar findings and concluded that the education had a significant direct impact on the salary of EHS professionals ("ASSE Compensation" 27).

Earning an accredited SH&E related degree may even be a requirement for those desiring to obtain a professional certification. For example, the Board of Certified Safety Professionals (BCSP) requires Certified Safety Professional (CSP) candidates to hold "an accredited bachelor's degree in any field" or "an accredited associate degree in safety and health" (BCSP 3). In addition, the BCSP will award various experience points to CSP candidates for specific types of degrees from accredited institutions and ABET accredited degrees.

Other benefits from obtaining an SH&E related degree include prestige, credibility and a sense of accomplishment or self-satisfaction. There is a sense of prestige given to those who have successfully completed an SH&E related BS degree and even more prestige for those who have obtained an advanced EHS related degree. Although a touchy subject for some, those who have successfully completed an accredited EH&S related BS or MS degree are typically viewed as more credible by their peers, associates and the public than those working in the field without an accredited SH&E related degree. In addition, many experience a great sense of accomplishment and satisfaction from working hard to improve their knowledge, skills, and academic credentials.

Accreditation

Accreditation is often misunderstood. Accreditation is a formal process that ensures minimum standards and level of quality are met (Helm 6). According to the U.S. Department of Education, "The goal of accreditation is to ensure that education provided by institutes of higher education meet acceptable levels of quality" (U.S. Department of Education). In the United States, for a degree to be considered accredited, it must come from an institution that is accredited by an accreditation body that is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education (<http://www.ed.gov>) and/or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA, <http://chea.org>) (Bear 44). A complete list of authorized accrediting bodies may be found at their respective websites.

There are 6 regional accrediting bodies recognized by both: they are the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, and the Western Association of Schools and Colleges. An online degree obtained from an institution that is regionally accredited is considered no different than a traditional degree obtained from a regionally accredited institution.

In addition, there are also 2 national bodies that are recognized: they are the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools and the Distance Education and Training Council. However, beware because an institution with regional accreditation may not accept transfer credit from another institution that does not have regional accreditation. Also, there are state agencies

and a group of professional accrediting agencies that are recognized. The American Board of Engineering Technology (ABET) is a recognized professional accrediting body that accredits specific SH&E related degree programs.

Finding an Accredited Online SH&E Related Degree

There are many ways to find an accredited online SH&E related degree program. The American Society of Safety Engineers has an educational resource area on their website (<http://www.asse.org/professionalaaffairs/education/directory/index.php>) that lists regionally and ABET accredited SH&E related degree programs. In addition, the Sloan Consortium, which is made up of regional accredited institutions that offer online learning courses and degree programs, has a website (www.sloan-c.org) that can be searched by institution name or degree subjects. There are other guides and web search engines that may be used, but caution and due diligence needs to be exercised and each school and program should be fully evaluated before a selection is made.

Criteria for Selecting an Appropriate Online Degree Program

There are many factors that should be considered when selecting an appropriate online degree program in addition to accreditation. Undertaking an online degree program is a big commitment and should not be taken lightly. Career goals should be determined and the degree program should be thoroughly evaluated to ensure it matches those goals. There are many questions that should be answered:

- What are the objectives and intended learning outcomes of the degree program? *There should be clear objectives and intended learning outcomes for the degree program. For example, a safety professional with an SH&E related BS degree who wants to move into EHS management should make sure the degree will give the skills and knowledge needed to make that move. Does the program emphasize theory, practical application or both?*
- Who was the degree designed for? *Was the degree program designed for someone with or without SH&E related work experience, or both.*
- What are the demographics of the current students? *The demographics of the students are important. Are the students primarily full-time traditional students in the 18-23 year old range or are they older working adults? Are they primarily working SH&E professionals taking courses on a part-time basis? If so, what are their job titles and who do they work for? Can some of them be contacted as references for the program?*
- Does the degree program have an industrial advisory board? *If so, who is on the board and what does the board do? It is important to know how the degree program was developed. Programs designed with input from working SH&E professionals are designed to meet the needs of those professionals and their employers. It is also important to know who is on the industrial advisory board. Is there representation from appropriate government agencies (OSHA, EPA), various industries and SH&E consulting companies?*

- What is the placement rate of the graduates of the degree program? *Does the institution have career placement services? Can the graduates of the program expect to get a job? If so, what type of jobs and who are some of the employers who have hired graduates of the program? Can some of the graduates be contacted as references for the program?*
- What is the average salary of the degree program graduates? *Salary can vary greatly; however, the institution should be able to provide the basic salary range of program graduates.*
- What do friends, colleagues and employers think of the degree program? *Knowing someone who is familiar with the program and who will vouch for the program can provide an assurance of quality.*
- What are the admissions requirements for the degree program? *It is a good idea to thoroughly understand the admissions requirements before spending money applying to the program. Be sure to talk to the degree program advisor to find out if there are exceptions or if the pre-requisites may be completed while in the program. Some advisors may even “unofficially” review your credentials to give you an idea where you stand before you actually apply to the program.*
- What are the course requirements for the degree program? *How many credit hours are required to complete the degree program? Does the institution use a semester or quarter credit hour system? Three semester hours is equal to 4 quarter credit hours. What are the required courses and how many electives are available. If it is a master’s degree program, is there a thesis or project required? If so, what topics have students written about in the past?*
- How long will it take to complete the degree and how are the courses scheduled? *Are courses only offered certain quarters or semesters? What about during the summer? Is there a clear path and course progression for those completing the program on a part-time basis?*
- Are there any on-campus requirements? *Many programs may be completed completely through online learning. Others may require some time on campus.*
- Does the institution accept transfer credit or credit by experience? *For working SH&E professionals credit by experience can be very appealing; however, beware of degree programs that accept a lot of credit by experience. Also, it is not uncommon for individuals to be able to transfer some credit from one regionally accredited institution to another.*
- Are internships or co-ops available? *Internship and co-ops provide a valuable learning experience. The hands-on practical experience that is gained from a co-op is unmatched in the classroom and is a great addition to any resume. High quality degree programs will have internship and co-ops available for their students. Find out if they are available? What type of co-op jobs have students obtained and which employers have students worked for?*
- What is the student to instructor ratio? *Beware of large online courses. Effective online courses have a lot of interaction between students and instructors.*

- How much does it cost and what financial aid is available? *Cost is always an important consideration; however, thoroughly check out the cost and available financial aid. Many programs will offer scholarships or other sources of funding to offset high tuition. In addition, many institutions have tuition deferment programs for students sponsored by their employers. Don't use cost as the sole determining factor when selecting a degree program. A higher tuition may be offset by the quality of the program and type of job secured after completion of the degree is completed.*
- How long has the degree program been available through online learning? *An established online degree program with a strong track record will probably be preferable to a new program that has not worked out the problems and issues associated with online learning.*
- How prevalent is online learning at the institution? *Does the institution have a commitment to online learning? How many online degree programs and courses does the institution offer? How long have they offered online learning? Does the institution have dedicated resources to manage and administer online learning?*
- How many full-time faculty and part-time faculty are there? *It is common for programs to utilize adjunct or part-time faculty; however, be wary of programs that do not have full-time dedicated faculty.*
- What are the qualifications of the degree program faculty? *Do they have practical SH&E experience? Do they have SH&E related degrees? Do they hold professional certifications? Do they practice SH&E consulting? Since there is a limited number of advanced degree options in the SH&E field, it is not uncommon for institutions to have professors with degrees that are not EH&S related. Look for programs with professors who have practical experience as well as teaching experience.*
- How long have the professors been with program and what are their qualifications to teach online learning courses. *Teaching online learning courses is not the same as teaching traditional classroom courses. Professors need to be familiar with the technology and teaching techniques that make online learning successful. It takes a lot of work to prepare and teach successful online learning courses.*
- Does the institution have support for faculty who teach online courses? *Is there training and coaching available for online faculty? What about technology support? If there is support, what is it and how much is there?*
- Does the institute provide support for online learning students? *Online learning students require a lot of support with the hardware and software used to deliver the courses. Many online learning students are not-traditional learners, are working adults taking courses on a part-time basis. They may have questions or need support during the evenings or weekends?*
- What about library services? *Is the institution library set able to support distance learning students? What services do they provide online learners? Can online learning students get assistance from the library? What access to journal articles or books do online learners*

have? Are journal articles and books available online? What about graduate thesis and project support?

- *What types of computer hardware, software and internet access is needed to complete the online degree? Technology advances have provided a lot of improvements for online learning including advanced course management software, streaming video lectures, virtual meetings, chat groups, etc. Specifications for hardware, software and internet access should be clearly established and communicated to students.*
- *How are the online courses taught? What is the course management software? Are the online learning courses set up to be synchronous or asynchronous? Most online learners need asynchronous courses so they can be completed in the evening or on the weekends. What about lectures, textbooks and other readings? Are case studies and team assignments used? If there is teamwork, how does a team of online learners accomplish the work? What about interaction with the instructors? Are emails, phone calls, conference calls, virtual meetings and online chats used? Are there online discussions? How are quizzes and examinations administered? Do examinations need to be proctored? These are all important questions that need to be considered before choosing the right online program.*

Characteristics of Good Online Learners

Online learning may not be for everyone. One of the misconceptions of online learning is that online learning degrees are less rigorous and not as difficult as degrees earned through traditional face-to-face methods. However, most students find that online learning courses are not easier than face-to-face courses and many find that online courses actually require more work. Accredited online learning degrees are a lot of work and students who undertake them work very hard.

There are certain characteristics of successful online learners. Online learners tend to be highly self-motivated and driven to succeed. Online courses are typically set up in modules where a certain amount of work must be completed within a certain range of time. Students who procrastinate can find themselves behind in a hurry. Successful online students are highly organized and manage their time well. They also have the self-discipline to stick to their work plans.

In addition, successful online students are typically very good readers. They also are able to put thoughts down in writing when they create emails, contribute to discussions, work on team projects and complete individual written assignments.

Conclusion

Technology advances in computers, software and the internet along with online learning methodology have led to a proliferation of quality accredited online degree programs. This increase in quantity and quality has opened up a new door for working adults who want to obtain an accredited SH&E degree. However, caution must be exercised to ensure the right online SH&E degree program is chosen. Asking the right questions and ensuring that the online degree

program has the proper accreditation will significantly increase the likelihood of a positive and satisfying life changing experience.

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