CLICKING AWAY AT AN MBA

Schools trade exclusivity for practicality by offering advanced degree programs online.

The graduate degree that once was a mark of the elite in the business world is now just a mouse click away.

You can sit at home and select from more than 100 universities offering online courses that lead to a masters degree of business administration.

In South Florida, Nova Southeastern offers a completely online MBA. Florida International University offers hybrid programs combining virtual classrooms and campus visits. So do the University of Florida and Duke, both major recruiters in this area.

But that's just the start of a student's choices. Little known Canyon College of Caldwell, Idaho, will let you get an MBA online. So will virtual Jones International University in Denver, the Open University of Hong Kong, Indiana Wesleyan and the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater.

"It's buyer beware," warns John Fernandes, president of AACSB, the major accrediting organization for business schools. The choices, he adds, are vast because "almost all are now getting into some form of distance learning."

The number of MBA cyber students is expected to soar from 5,000 to 50,000 in the next two years, according to Business Week.

But what are virtual degrees worth? Perhaps a lot, which might make their holders feel good since they could be paying from $20,000 to $95,000 for them. Some of the hybrid programs in particular are considerably more expensive than on-campus alternatives.

MBA PROGRAMS AT A GLANCE

More than 100 colleges have online MBA offerings, from Albachus University in Alberta to Webster University in St. Louis. Many programs are listed on the Web at www-widelearn.com/wmlonline-mba.htm.

Here are some major programs that recruit in South Florida:

- Duke University - Offers a combination online-office global MBA. Cost: $14,000 to $50,000, including accommodations and laptop. Ranked by Business Week as one of top five biz schools in nation. AACSB accredited.

- University of Florida - Combines online offerings with campus seminars. Ranked by Business Week as one of top five programs in country. Costs $27,500 to $30,000, including laptop and accommodation. AACSB accredited.

- Florida Atlantic University - Just starting to offer classes online. Using the Net primarily for training and support. Cost is $5,300 - a year for general MBA, $1,250 for in-state students. AACSB accredited.

- Florida International University - Offers telelearning MBA, geared to international students. Includes online and occasional seminars at the pinecrest House. Cost is $13,000. AACSB accredited.

- Nova Southeastern - Offers complete online MBA. Has 600 students engaged in Net classes, making it biggest Web MBA program in South Florida. Just approved by U.S. Army for study by its soldiers. Cost $20,000. Not accredited by AACSB.

CONNECTED: Marilyn Wiley directs Florida Atlantic University's MBA program from its Fort Lauderdale offices. FAU started online offerings for the convenience of its students.
REACHING OUT: Bob Sellani, head of Nova Southeastern's MBA program, simulates an Internet dialogue students would have. His picture is shown on the screen.

With 200 students working completely online and another 400 taking online courses, Nova's three-year-old cyber MBA program is the biggest in South Florida. Students feel they are in the next step in distance education — and very important for our long-term this technology must become part of the growing process. All this competition has helped spawn other online programs.

"Too much needed to protect our market," says Marilyn Wiley, who directs the Florida Atlantic MBA program from its Fort Lauderdale offices. FAU started two online offerings last fall. "We targeted online classes to students already enrolled," Wiley says. "One was a business woman had the baby the first week of class. Another transferred to Michigan. We weren't advertising it to recruit students. We're just expanding the choices we students want to have.

FIU, which also started online MBA classes last fall, is focusing on its strength concentrating on both executives who live here, like Ferreira, and business people who travel extensively in the region.

"We think it's going to be very important," says Joyce Elam, dean of FIU's college of business administration. FIU, FAU and many other online universities including Florida, and Duke — prefer hybrid programs, in which students are required to occasionally show up for face-to-face encounters with faculty and staff. "It's a real world experience," says Gray at Duke. "In the classroom, our students learn as much from fellow students as they do their professor. We believe it's a great combination — some online classes and occasional get-togethers — that really makes it a comprehensive, rich MBA.

Nova, however, believes that some students can get just as good an education online as offline. "It's a traditional classroom, you learn by listening," says Sellani, "but that's just one way of learning.

SETTING STANDARDS

The key issue is the quality of online education. "It's easy to do a poorly managed MBA over the Internet," says Erik Gordon, director of MBA programs at the University of Florida. "It's very difficult to do a high-quality one.

The real problem is a lot of not-so-good operations. They're doing it cheaply — and post them on the Net.... That's going to get this delivery end very much a bad reputation."