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2009 GRADUATE SCHOOL guide

Alphabet Soup - graduate degrees flavored by flexibility, market

By Jo Ann Rathgeb
 Special Correspondent

One are the days when going to graduate school meant only a career in academics or a move up the corporate ladder. The Ph.D. and the MBA have been joined by an alphabet full of flexible and employment-relevant degrees.

Graduate schools have kept up with the needs of students and their concerns about time and money by developing programs that meet specific needs.

At Jefferson College of Health Sciences, M.S. degrees for nurses and physician assistants address health-care issues including the country's nursing shortage and primary-care needs.

Jefferson's MSPA program, in fact, grew out of the needs of Southwestern Virginia, and Wilton Kennedy, program director, noted that 50 percent of PA graduates have remained in the rural area around Roanoke.

Digging into the community is more than a metaphor at Virginia State University, where a degree in plant sciences uses the school's agricultural learning center, Randolph Farm. The program focuses on research methods that students can use to boost local economies and alleviate global hunger.

Since many graduate students want to work full time, part-time and online classes are popular. At Longwood University, the part-time student is indeed the "average" grad student. Longwood assists them with many options. Some programs offer two courses each term, and there are two online degrees.



Students pursue master's degrees in education at UMW's College of Graduate and Professional Studies.

Online programs are increasingly popular. The distance MBA at Colorado State University is one such program; despite the distance, Virginia students can complete the degree with ease.

Then there are "hybrid" classes, such as some at Longwood, which meet in person about three to five times, then allow the rest of the work to be done online.

While taking classes slowly is the traditional way to a graduate degree, the opposite is also true: speeding things up.

One example is the accelerated master's program in systems engineering at the University of Virginia, which offers a degree in one year. The program includes class meetings every other Friday and

Saturday in Charlottesville, plus a two-week residency.

Applying for graduate programs has also been streamlined, with most students applying online. "Applying online is easier for both the applicant and the admissions officer," noted Donna Spradlin, director of graduate recruiting at Radford University.

David Hawsey, vice president of enrollment management at Emory & Henry College, noted that many of the school's grad-school applicants are only getting started when they get online.

"These are largely working professionals or returning adult students or people already working in their field. They rely a lot on information on the Internet, but then they want to talk with faculty," he said. Emory & Henry professors often discuss course work with prospective grad students by telephone.

Students looking for traditional graduate programs - the MBA, academic and teaching degrees - can certainly find them, but now even those with specific needs or niche ambitions will also find, statewide, the program that's right for them.



At Jefferson College of Health Sciences, Lauren Bowers is part of the Master of Science in Physician Assistant program.

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