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For-Profit Universities Meeting

By Sherrie Negrea

At the age of 40, Wayne Odachowski decided to switch careers from systems engineering to a field that had always intrigued him: disaster and emergency management. After joining a company in Maryland, he traveled for months at a time helping people rebuild their properties after Hurricane Katrina, the southern California wildfires and other natural disasters.

Though he had a bachelor's degree in information technology, Odachowski wanted to learn more about his new field so that he could start his own company. In 2006, he enrolled in an online master's program with [American Public University System](#), which offered the flexibility to take courses while he travelled on the job.

A year later, he and a business partner launched Infinity Restoration Inc., a company that earned \$5 million in its first year of operation and now employs 45 people. Odachowski, now 48, attributes the success of his company to the hands-on training he received while earning his master's degree.

"Halfway through the program, I realized that I don't need to work for somebody else. I can do it on my own," says Odachowski, who is now pursuing an online doctorate in business administration with a specialty in homeland security from [North Central University](#), based in Prescott Valley, Ariz.

For working adults who want to advance in their careers, earning an online degree from a for-profit college has become an increasingly attractive option. In 2008, 4.6 million students across the country were enrolled in at least one online course, compared to 1.6 million in 2002. This represents a compound annual growth rate of 19 percent, compared to the annual increase of 1.5 percent in enrollment in higher education overall during this six-year period, according to the Sloan Consortium, a non-profit organization that supports online learning.

"I think under the current environment, you will see a continued growth of for-profit schools because they are meeting a niche in higher education that no else is meeting," says David Harpool, chief academic officer for [Westwood College Online](#), headquartered in Denver, Colo. "If the President and Secretary of Education wants to meet their goal of having the most educated workforce in the world in 20 years, for-profit colleges and universities are going to be part of that."

Since only 27.5 percent of Americans hold college degrees, for-profit universities can play a key role in educating the workforce in the 21st century. Twelve of the 20 fastest growing occupations between 2006 and 2016 require at least an associate's degree or higher, according to a 2009 U.S. Department of Labor report.

Students who enroll in career colleges are typically adults working in unskilled positions who have tried attending a traditional campus but want a more flexibly structured education. "They spend some time out there working and realize there's no upward mobility without higher education," says Kevin Modany, chief executive officer of [ITT Educational Services](#), which operates 130 technical institutes and a college in New Hampshire. "They're trying to climb that barrier wall to the other side – a whole different world where the skilled people live."

Helenjene Curtis, 29, was attending a nursing program at a community college in New Jersey when she had to withdraw to care for an ill family member. By the time she planned to return to school, she had two boys, including one who has autism, and could not manage the college's rigid class schedule with two children.

In 2005, she enrolled in an online psychology program with American Public University System and earned her bachelor's degree three years later. She is now completing an online master's degree in forensic psychology from [Argosy University](#), based in Phoenix, Ariz., and hopes to start on a doctorate at the school next year.

"I feel like I'm more knowledgeable having done an online education rather than a brick- and-mortar education," says Curtis. "Generally, you feel more comfortable sharing information when you don't have to look at people and see any body language. When you're in an online environment, you don't have that. It makes people more open. They're willing to share more information and more personal experiences."

Another advantage of enrolling in an online degree program at a for-profit college is the class sizes. At [Post University](#), the average class size for online courses is 18 students. "It's a very healthy ratio that allows the faculty to take more of a one-on-one approach," says Veronica Marrero, director of enrollment management for the accelerated degree program at Post, the

first university in Connecticut to offer regionally accredited degree programs completely online.

At American Public University System, headquartered in Charles Town, W.Va., online classes are limited to 20 students. "You're not going to be sitting in a lecture hall with 200 other people being taught by a teaching assistant," adds Terry Grant, associate vice president, the university's enrollment management.

Odachowski, who has both associate and bachelor degrees from a community college and state university in Maryland, says the quality of the instructors at American Public University System "far exceeded" those at the state colleges he attended. "They were practitioners first and educators second," he says. "They didn't need to be at a lecture at 6 p.m. every Monday, Wednesday and Friday. What that allowed was instructors with Ph.D.s and master's who could continue to focus on their careers."

While online programs were unheard of just 30 years ago, virtual learning is now an integral part of higher education that has gained more acceptance as companies are increasingly hiring employees with online degrees.

"What employers tell us is the skills that students learn – how to work in small groups, in online chat rooms, and with e-mail communication – are the same skills they'll need in the workplace," Harpool says. "It's not just the type of degree. It's how they're learning that is attracting them to employers."

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