

## Graduate Degree Programs: Plain Vanilla, Chocolate Fudge, or a Cherry on Top?

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When something becomes common or easily produced, it is considered a commodity. Friedman explained that any specialized service or product could become a commodity because of new technology.<sup>1</sup> A case in point may be graduate degree programs in higher education. New colleges or universities are extremely rare. In fact, there have been only a hand-full in the last ten years in the United States. However, hundreds of graduate programs

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat* (New York, 2006), p. 298.

have submitted credentials to their accrediting agencies for approval during this same period. Is this an example of a specialized service becoming commonplace, perhaps? Most of these new graduate programs are driven by technology. Online and off-campus degrees are now commonplace, even for the most prestigious institutions. Small-to-moderate-size colleges and universities, both private and public, have discovered that the cost of the technology to get into the game is relatively small and the revenue potential is quite large. Technology is also making off-campus sites more attractive and affordable to institutions offering graduate degrees. Professors can now teach in several locations simultaneously. Technology has made it possible for students not only to attend classes away from campus, but also to receive their degrees as off-campus students. Students that attend class online or at satellite sites have access to their professors by email or other electronic means. They access their libraries and use library services online. Students register and order books or school spirit paraphernalia from the campus bookstore online. They access assignments, submit assignment, and receive their grades electronically. They can even watch the home team's football or basketball games via live streaming on a computer at home.

To attract the attention of prospective students, it seems that a college or university need only advertise that the program is "student-friendly." A billboard with a group of smiling grad students is stereotypical. Being student-friendly may mean never having to leave your home from start to finish of your graduate program. It may mean that you can attend classes at a satellite site near your home. It may mean attending an "accelerated" program of study that requires as little as 5 weeks to complete each 3 semester-hour course.

It may mean that instead of a thesis or dissertation, you complete an action research paper that is limited to your own work or school setting.

Technology has clearly defined the four important issues in graduate degree programs: (1) Speed, (2) Convenience, (3) Cost, and (4) Quality. There is very little disagreement that the first three are the easiest to measure. Prospective graduate students usually ask; "How long will it take, how far do I have to travel, and how much will it cost?" In some cases, getting a graduate degree has very little to do with what will be learned or even the cost, and everything to do with how long it will take or how many papers are required. If institutions of higher education allow speed and convenience to become the driving policy issues, competition will likely impose a level of mediocrity on their graduate degree programs. They become ordinary and unoriginal - the plain vanilla programs. The technology that makes online/off-campus degrees possible is causing a convergence of cost and quality between large and small public universities and between public and private institutions to a lesser extent. When students consider graduate programs, cost and quality are less of an issue if speed and convenience are demonstrably different among institutions. In fact, cost is likely to be the third most important issue and quality usually finishes a poor fourth in the consideration of graduate programs by some prospective students.

In extension of Friedman's ideas, the graduate programs that are willing to offer "chocolate fudge" in addition to the plain vanilla degree can distinguish themselves from the hundreds of other graduate degrees that technology has made available to students. The few institutions that are willing to offer a "cherry on top" will excel at providing quality master's

and doctoral programs. Quality graduate programs are found at institutions that offer exceptional student support, as measured by a high graduation rate; excellent academic preparation, as measured by job placement success; and outstanding value, as measured by low student debt at graduation. It would be encouraging to see fewer billboards with smiling faces and more stressing the quality of programs rather than the speed or convenience of obtaining a graduate degree.

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