

# THE REALITIES OF ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION

PART ONE: THE LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVE

EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION,  
LEADERSHIP IN PRACTICE

**LEARNING WITHOUT LIMITS**

THE CALIFORNIA SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY INITIATIVE FOR  
A NEW PARADIGM IN HIGHER EDUCATION



**CALIFORNIA SOUTHERN**  
**U N I V E R S I T Y**

Founded in 1978

# THE REALITIES OF ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION

## PART ONE: THE LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVE

By Tom Dellner

*“The thought that someone needs to physically stand in front of you and lecture for you to learn is just ridiculous, and it’s certainly not the way of the future. In many ways, it’s not even the way of the past: Abraham Lincoln did just fine.”*

*-Julie Myers, PsyD*

***Excellence in Education,  
Leadership in Practice***

As online higher education continues to grow and gain acceptance across the country and around the world, questions—and misconceptions—remain. How does the faculty-student relationship compare to that found in the traditional university setting? Is the learning methodology effective? Is the coursework rigorous? Is it relevant to today’s workplace? Are students adequately supported as they work through their degree programs?

We sat down with four recent graduates from California Southern University—two from the School of Business, two from the School of Behavioral Sciences—for a candid and wide-ranging discussion addressing these, and other important issues regarding online education generally, and CalSouthern specifically.



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**CalSouthern:** Why did you choose to pursue your degree online?

**Julie Myers, PsyD:** I had been through two doctoral programs, earned my teaching credential, received an addiction treatment certification—I've been to so many classes and, frankly, wasted so much time driving to and from campus, waiting for professors, and listening to other students pontificate in class. Then there's the sometimes-toxic culture that exists in traditional graduate schools, with students trying to impress or intimidate you with their intelligence—behaviors that you would expect people to grow out of after high school, but which still can be pervasive. I was ready to be finished with that nonsense and to focus strictly on learning, learning at my own pace, and not wasting time.

**Bashar Elkhatib, DBA:** I work full time, have a family, and travel. Going to a brick-and-mortar school and attending classes—whether during the day or at night—simply wasn't a viable option for me. Committing to a regular classroom schedule would have more than an inconvenience; it would have been an impossibility.

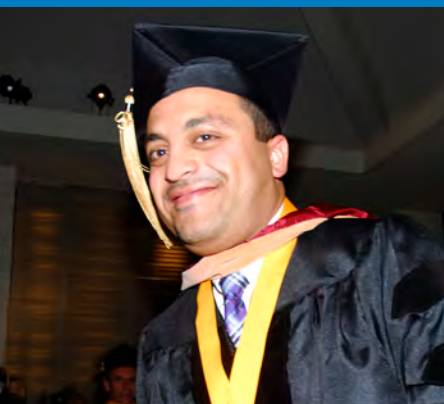
**"Coach" Mara Leigh Taylor, PsyD:** Getting my PsyD would not have been possible had I not been able to do it on my terms and on my schedule.

I simply did not fit into a formal, structured academic environment. I have a life; I have a child; I have a non-profit; I have a house that needs to be paid for. There wasn't a chance on earth that I could have done it if I had to sit in a classroom as most traditional institutions require.

**CalSouthern:** Why did you ultimately decide upon CalSouthern?

**Elkhatib:** I did my research and asked questions. I spoke with Dean Minchin of the School of Business on multiple occasions. I was impressed with the business faculty. Most not only have doctoral degrees, but also are leaders in the field, as well, and fully immersed in the business world. This was very attractive to me. I wanted more than simply learning from a textbook. I wanted feedback and input on real-case scenarios; it was important to me for my education to include both traditional coursework and real-world experience.

**Taylor:** I had a number of friends who helped me research the School of Behavioral Sciences. They found that it had a strong reputation among online schools and that the degree would qualify me to sit for the licensure exam in my state.



**BASHAR ELKHATIB, DBA** is a Technical Program Manager with one of the Fortune 500's most innovative technology companies. Elkhatib is an accomplished program manager and business/technical analyst with more than 16 years' experience managing technical projects related to IT systems, training, development, quality analysis, collaboration, security, and design and installation systems. He has multiple certifications, including ITIL, PMP, and Lean Six Sigma.

The holder of a BS and two master's degrees, Elkhatib attained his DBA from CalSouthern to complement his IT skills with key business knowledge relevant to his industry. He is currently contemplated pursuing a second doctorate degree, in education.

*"With online education, at least at CalSouthern, the school will not impose on your personal space outside of your studies. But in my experience, the door is open and there are opportunities to be more engaged with the university if you express an interest."*

*- Bashar Elkhatib, DBA*

**CalSouthern:** What are some of the most significant benefits of online higher education?

**Benjamin Valdez, DBA:** For me, one of the best aspects was the education model. Much of the learning is research- and writing-based. You learn to research, interpret, synthesize and then apply information, and in the business world, that's everything. There's very little memorizing to regurgitate and then forget, which I have found can happen in some traditional programs. I firmly believe that the skills required and enhanced by this model more closely track the skills demanded from the business world.

Also, I like the way the courses and programs are laid out. Each assignment builds on the previous one throughout a course, just as each course builds upon the previous as you progress through your program. It's all there for you to see and for you to track your progress. It really adds context to your education; you gain an understanding of how it all integrates together, and this is something I think is lacking in many traditional schools.

*"Friends and associates who had gone to other schools told me horror stories about the doctoral project process. But my committee chair was terrific. I met every Friday for one to two hours with her, and occasionally on Saturdays, as well. She put so much effort and so much of her time into guiding and encouraging me through the process. Other members of the committee were extremely helpful, too. I wasn't out there by myself. I had people to support me the whole way."*

*- Benjamin Valdez, DBA*

**Elkhatib:** The first thing that comes to mind is probably the most obvious: the flexibility, being able to login at any time day or night to work, submit assignments or review graded work, or to post comments to other students. I once had to travel overseas to visit my parents for two weeks and found it easy to keep up with my program—everything I needed was available to me with a laptop and Internet connection.

The other thing that stands out to me is something that might be counter-intuitive: the access I had to my professors. I know that many people would assume that this is a downside to online higher education, and perhaps at some schools, it is. But I had the email addresses of my professors, their cell phone numbers, and many were available on the weekends. With some, I would chat via instant messaging. People assume that there is less communication with faculty in an online education environment, but I certainly don't remember having this sort of communication access to my professors at the brick-and-mortar institutions I have attended.



**DR. JULIE MYERS** is a licensed clinical psychologist, who specializes in teaching self-regulatory strategies for coping with addictive behaviors and substance use, procrastination, mood disorders (including bipolar disorder), panic, phobia, attention, and sleep problems in adults, adolescents, and children. As an experienced psychologist in San Diego, CA, she is dedicated to empowering individuals and families to regain control over their lives. Dr. Myers uses a cognitive-behavioral and positive psychology approach, adding biofeedback, neurofeedback, exposure therapy, breath-retraining, and psychopharmacology consultation as needed.

Dr. Myers is Board Certified in Biofeedback (BCIA), a Master Addiction Counselor (NAADAC), earned a California Teaching Credential, and is completing a master's degree in Clinical Psychopharmacology. She is the Volunteer Advisor for SMART Recovery San Diego and serves on the Continuing Education Committee of the San Diego Psychological Association. Dr. Myers served as a staff psychologist at a comprehensive, non-12-step addiction treatment center. Dr. Myers serves clients in need of alcohol treatment in San Diego as well as other addictive behaviors.

**Taylor:** Whenever I got discouraged, I would go to the “Degree Plan” section of the Learners website. Seeing your progress right in front of you and having access to all the information was very comforting to me. You get visibility of the big picture and the pot of gold at the end. It’s very transparent, it’s all there, and it’s available at any time. It’s so nice to have control over your program and to be able to chart your progress.

**Myers:** Being able to work at my own pace with no wasted time was critical for me. The program isn’t easy; in fact, it’s lots of work. But all the time, all the effort you put into it brings you that much closer to your degree. I found that to be gratifying.

**CalSouthern:** Conversely, what are a few of the challenges associated with online education?

**Taylor:** People procrastinate, and as a busy adult deciding where to devote your time, the squeaky wheel gets the grease. Online education—as opposed to job or family—is never the squeaky wheel. You need to dig deep and be very disciplined.

**Elkhatib:** There is opportunity for student interaction, but it is, of course, virtual. Some students, I know from my experience teaching, like to work with others in groups. Perhaps they like the

social element or require encouragement, constant feedback, or a support group. For me, this was not critical, but I imagine it might be for others.

**Valdez:** You need to be responsible and resourceful. You have to recognize and be honest with yourself when you are not grasping an aspect of the material, and then you need to proactively reach out to your instructor to ask a question or request additional assistance.

**CalSouthern:** Did you find your academic program to be rigorous?

**Myers:** In many ways, it mirrored my experience at traditional universities in that if you wanted a good grade, the work was quite rigorous. You could also take it easier, but your grade would reflect it. That online students don’t receive a quality education is a horrible misconception, from my experience. The textbooks and other resources are often the same as in traditional programs, and you have to establish that you’ve learned the material. The thought that someone needs to physically stand in front of you and lecture for you to learn is just ridiculous, and it’s certainly not the way of the future. In many ways, it’s not even the way of the past: Abraham Lincoln did just fine.



**“COACH” MARA LEIGH TAYLOR** is a living example of a perfect dichotomy. On any day of the week you will find Dr. Taylor in the homes or offices of the world’s most affluent individuals who seek her help building life-strategies and recovery plans. When not tending to the needs of the uber-wealthy, she can be found sitting behind bars among a group of death row inmates, sharing her unique techniques for change with the most hardened criminals in our country. “If my techniques can work with seasoned criminals who are repeat offenders, and individuals who have a tendency to buy their way out of responsibility, why not bring that information to the general public?” asks Coach Taylor.

Expanding her success as a private life coach for the affluent, Coach Taylor began working with criminals and convicts in 2002 after a tour of Federal Corrections Institution at Terminal Island in San Pedro, California. In 2005, she founded the California-based non-profit Getting Out by Going In to serve the 2.3 million incarcerated men, women, and children in the United States. “GOGI,” as the program is affectionately called by the inmates, has quickly become the leader in Inmate Self-Corrective Education, with more than 10,000 letters received by the volunteer GOGI staff in the Long Beach, CA mailroom.

**Valdez:** One of the biggest misconceptions about online education is that it is an easy path to a degree. I have found it to be at least as challenging—and often more so—than a traditional ground-based or even a hybrid education model because it requires discipline and self-motivation. And some people have an idea that the coursework itself is somehow substandard. The textbooks are often, in fact, the same as those used in traditional schools.

**CalSouthern:** How were you able to manage your schedule to devote sufficient time to your coursework?

**Taylor:** You just have to find the will and the discipline. I approached it in two ways. I would calendar the time—maybe two hours—as a daily or regular activity, whether it was the first thing in the morning or the last thing I did at night. Essentially, I created a classroom-like schedule for myself. Also, I would take advantage of larger blocks of time when it was available, often on holidays or the weekends. This enabled me to successfully complete the more demanding assignments that were not—for me, at least—best approached with an hour-at-a-time approach on a daily or nightly basis.

**Elkhatib:** You need to be committed, consistent, and organized with your tasks.

I'm one of those people that, if I have the time and a quiet environment, I can very easily work five or six productive hours continuously. But I can't be thinking of family or work—I have to be focused. So I would work late on Friday or Saturday nights, or I would get up very early on a Saturdays. I would sequester myself in my office and go through everything required for that specific assignment. Or, if had a hard time motivating myself, I would go to the library. We have a wonderful local library and it, of course, has Internet connections. The key is time management—getting those hours and creating the environment that allows you to make those hours count.

**CalSouthern:** Did you feel sufficiently connected to the university?

**Myers:** For my needs, I was able to develop satisfactory relationships with faculty, staff, and other students. I wasn't looking to graduate school to develop a second family or a large network of friends, and I am not the type of person that needs constant support and encouragement. For these people, online education might not be the optimal environment.

**Taylor:** I suppose it would've been nice to have met more of the faculty face to face and known them on a more intimate level.



**BENJAMIN VALDEZ** is the Business Department Chairman for the Community College of Aurora, which has campuses in Aurora and Denver, CO, as well as online programs. In his current position, he is responsible for the quality and development of the college's business program. This includes working with local high schools to expand the new concurrent enrollment program whereby high school students take college courses while in high school and earning college credit.

Prior to his current position, Valdez was the Chief Executive Officer and District Superintendent for Life Skills Charter High School. As the CEO, he oversaw 13 high schools located in Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico with a total enrollment of more than 8,000 students. Valdez worked with Life Skills for close to a decade, where he also served as a high school principal.

**Elkhatib:** Great question. I had a wonderful experience with the school and remain connected to it. I am one of those students that prefers to feel a connection with the school and to develop relationships with faculty, fellow students, and the administration. I actually reached out to Dean Minchin and told him that I would like to be more engaged with the school if any opportunities were available. He allowed me to be part of the university's student advisory committee, helping to represent the student body in meetings with the president, deans and other administrators. And I also had the honor of speaking at the university's commencement ceremony in 2009.

With online education, at least at CalSouthern, the school will not impose on your personal space outside of your studies. But in my experience, the door is open and there are opportunities to be more engaged with the university if you express an interest.

**CalSouthern:** Was your online education relevant to your interests and/or your career?

**Taylor:** I have a very specialized, unique area of interest: changing our penal system in the United States, focusing on restorative justice and inmate self-education. I often was given the flexibility to focus elements of my work—and certainly my doctoral project—on this topic. In most cases, I wasn't forced to digest material or perform activities that meant little to my career. Almost everything I did enhanced my ability to become an authority in the field that I have chosen. I think this is a true rarity in education.

**Myers:** Absolutely. I got my license on the first try and was able to open up a private practice. Now I'm on to a master's in psychopharmacology which will allow me to write prescriptions in certain states. The program and degree did everything for me I hoped it would.

**CalSouthern:** Was the technology associated with the online learning platform sufficient? Were you able to get the support you required if you needed help?

**Elkhatib:** I was impressed with CalSouthern's learning management system. And, in addition to the course materials, exams, etc., there are numerous other resources available to you. For example, if you were struggling with APA format, there was a guide and examples for you. There was an online library with vast databases of case studies, articles, whitepapers—everything you might need to conduct research. And there was a staff librarian available to help you. Sure, all this is available in a traditional setting, but here it was right there at your fingertips in your user interface. The support model was strong, too. I found IT responsive and committed, and you can contact them via phone, email, or chat. In addition, the entire school has an open-door policy. You can speak directly with the president, the deans, or the registrar's office. I've had experience with other online schools and can tell you firsthand that this doesn't always happen.

**Myers:** The learning platform enabled the learning process, provided the necessary resources, and never got in the way.

*"I simply did not fit into a formal, structured academic environment. I have a life; I have a child; I have a non-profit; I have a house that needs to be paid for. There wasn't a chance on earth that I could have earned my PsyD if I had to sit in a classroom as most traditional institutions require."*

*- "Coach" Mara Leigh Taylor, PsyD*

**CalSouthern:** If you were in a hiring position, would you consider an applicant with an online degree? Would you perceive him/her differently if the degree was from a traditional university?

**Myers:** I would focus on the applicants' skills and wouldn't favor one over the other. But I would know that the candidate with the online degree would be a self-driven learner, which is a great asset for any employer. I do suppose there might be situations that I might place more weight on the traditional degree, though. If I were hiring someone to write papers for leading journals, for example, I understand that a degree from a prestigious school might be more valued in those circles. But in other circumstances, I would just look to their skill sets.

**Valdez:** As a hiring manager, I would know that the person with the online degree would be resourceful and a self-starter, which are qualities I would want. However, I certainly would not discount a degree from a traditional school.

**CalSouthern:** What are some of your strongest memories of your experience at CalSouthern?

**Valdez:** For me, they all involve the process of completing my doctoral project. Friends and associates had told me horror stories about doctoral project committees and the defense of the project. But my committee chair was terrific. I met every Friday for one to two hours with her, and occasionally on Saturdays, as well. She put so much effort and so much of her time into guiding and encouraging me through the process. Other members of the committee were extremely helpful in honing my writing. I wasn't out there by myself. I had people to support me the whole way.

**Taylor:** I remember all the little milestones along the way. Completing projects or courses and watching the grades appear as you progress through your degree plan is extremely satisfying.

**Myers:** I have very pleasant memories about the graduation ceremony the university held. Other fond memories are of interactions with some of my best professors, like Dr. Carroll Ryan, who is now the university president.

**Elkhatib:** I remember long, late nights, or waking up early on Saturday mornings so that I could get my studying done and then spend the rest of the day with my family. These might sound like bad memories, but they aren't. Anything worthwhile you need to work for, and there's great satisfaction in meeting a significant goal.

**CalSouthern:** Overall, are you satisfied with your experience in online education and at CalSouthern specifically? Would you recommend it to others?

**Taylor:** Oh, yes. It allowed me to polish the stone of my previous education with an advanced degree and program that was, in many respects, closely tailored to my area of interest. It's increased my confidence level in my area of expertise. I would recommend it to anyone who finds themselves stagnated in their lives or careers. It's a wonderful way to push the envelope of your creativity and potential.

**Myers:** I am quite satisfied; the experience did everything for me I had hoped it would. And I would definitely recommend it to any learner who has the requisite level of maturity and self motivation.

**Valdez:** I am very pleased and would recommend—and have recommended—CalSouthern to others.

**Elkhatib:** I'm quite satisfied. It's a great way to stay competitive in your field in a tough economic environment, enter a new field, or develop a back-up plan to an existing career. Also, I am glad my kids saw how hard I worked to attain a higher degree. I hope they've gained an appreciation for the importance of education, and how it doesn't end once you've graduated from high school or college and settle into a job.

**Excellence in Education, Leadership in Practice** is published in conjunction with *Learning Without Limits: The California Southern University Initiative for a New Paradigm in Higher Education*.