“I took all of my classes online,” says Meredith Nelson ’96 AS, ’11 CI. “That was not originally my intent, but ended up being the case due to the variety of classes offered online in the program. At the beginning of my studies, my classes required several face-to-face meetings on campus, and I was glad that requirement was eliminated in my later classes.”

Many Distance Learning students are drawn to online classes because they can further their education without interrupting their careers, and they can set their own pace.

Nelson, who is employed by the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government as the deputy clerk of the Urban County Council, was employed throughout the time she was getting her master’s degree.

“The biggest benefit for completing my master’s degree online was that I was not tied into a particular face-to-face class schedule. I was able to complete reading and assignments in the time available to me, which was usually after 6 or 7 at night and on weekends,” she says. “If I had been required to come to classes in person, I would never have been able to complete the program.”

Her master’s degree is relevant, Nelson says, in that her department archives legislation and provides historical research to the Urban County Government that goes back to the 1790s.

Will Buntin ’04 CI, assistant director for student affairs in the UK School of Library and Information Science, says that at least 72 percent of all library science students are taking classes exclusively online. (He earned his UK degree taking some online classes, as well as campus classes.)

“Enrollment has been building consistently. Fall 2012 estimated enrollment is 11 percent higher than fall 2011 and 24 percent higher than fall 2010. These numbers refer to total enrollment, online and face-to-face students. With at least 72 percent of our students being exclusively online, it stands to reason that online is driving much of the growth,” Buntin says.

The School of Library and Information Science has been involved in Distance Education for over 30 years, he adds, but students were first able to complete the program totally online beginning in 2008. Currently, students from 25 states, including Kentucky, are taking library science classes online. On the horizon, starting in spring 2013, the School of Library and Information Science will launch UK’s first completely-online undergraduate minor in information studies.

There are many benefits to offering and taking online classes, says Buntin, who teaches some online classes for UK. “Online instruction doesn’t take up a classroom, and classroom space is absolutely at a premium,” he says. “Also, one of the main benefits of an online education is the removal of geography as a limiter.”

Students participate in classes, conferences and meet virtually through the use of webcams, headphones and microphones. Buntin says that using tools like Adobe Connect allows for a more traditional student-instructor interaction online, even though the student might be living in another part of the country. He also includes short videos, YouTube, discussion boards and Skype to enhance instruction while teaching his own classes. He says discussion boards are useful because online students refer back to discussions that have taken place during the semester to help solidify ideas.

Juan Armijo, a high school social studies teacher at Mayfield High School in Las Cruces, N.M., is enrolled in the online UK LIS master’s degree program. Armijo, who has a doctorate in secondary education from Arizona State University, decided he wanted to transition into the library profession but felt a master’s degree in the field would be helpful. “I researched and found that one of the best programs, with a bonus online option and affordability, is at the University of Kentucky, which has very high academic standards for admission and to continue with the program,” he says.

“Distance learning is quite rigorous. You have to master the content in order to be successful. I have found the faculty to be excellent in working with students online — always available, helpful and they go the extra mile to work with students,” Armijo says.

Jessica Maurice of Pfafftown, N.C., has a bachelor’s degree in anthropology from the University of North Carolina – Wilmington, and works two part time jobs, one in an art/historic home museum and one at a local public library. She expects to graduate from the LIS program in spring 2013.

Maurice notes that her classes online have allowed her the flexibility to travel, assist her grandmother with a move, and in general lead a more balanced life. But she did have to adjust her approach to learning to successfully complete her classes. “The fact that online communication isn’t always easy to interpret has also lead me to become more direct. If I don’t understand something, whether from a classmate or a teacher, I need to ask. I’m more directly involved in the experience this time around. I’m not sure that I’m a ‘quicker’ learner, but I do think that I’m a ‘better’ learner,” she says.
So often the next step in an individual’s career hinges on earning a master’s degree. It can be the pathway to possible salary increases, better job opportunities and an enhanced standing in the respective profession.

“The UK Distance Learning program no doubt was a major factor in my professional development, as well as with the promotion I received with the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Program,” says Melanie Poole, who is currently a regional director based in Athens, Ga., but was the unit manager in the Monroe, Ga., office while she was earning her UK master’s degree online. “I accepted the regional director position after completing the program.”

Individuals like Poole who work with people who have disabilities are part of a challenging and expanding profession. The Rehabilitation Counseling Program places an emphasis on enhancing quality of life, independent living and employment in the competitive labor market for people with disabilities. The University of Kentucky online program, accredited by the Council on Rehabilitation Education, trains students to understand the physical, psychological, social, economic and vocational needs of individuals with disabilities with regard to personal, social and vocational adjustment and placement into competitive employment.

The campus rehabilitation counseling program master’s degree was established in 1962. As the only such program in the Commonwealth, students who were not in commuting distance of Lexington did not have access to the degree, which is needed for continued employment. To achieve this goal of students earning their master’s in rehabilitation counseling from UK, a completely-online 16 month program (same time frame as the on-campus program), including the required 600 hour internship, with supervision from UK faculty via video conference, was implemented.

The structure of the program in an accelerated format is enhanced by the online environment. Students such as Poole have found that this is the ideal way to earn a degree while balancing a career, family and school.

Ralph Crystal, Wallace Charles Hill Professor of Rehabilitation Education and Rehabilitation Counseling Program coordinator, says that typically students perform their field work in the geographic region in which they reside. “The students we accept into the online rehabilitation counseling program are expected to have experience with people with disabilities and be employed in a rehabilitation counseling service delivery program. Thus, the vast majority of students are already employed in vocational rehabilitation settings. They are able to use their current employment for their field work. Students do not need to come to campus. It’s all done via computer using Adobe Connect for communication and supervision,” says Crystal.

For Poole, being able to utilize her Georgia work environment to satisfy her field training requirement was an added bonus. “One of the favorable factors was that the 600 hours of required field training entailed what I was doing in my daily work responsibilities. I was able to have approved supervision by my work supervisor who held the same master’s degree and appropriate certification,” she says. “The field portion of the training required me to more closely identify my work tasks while working with people with disabilities.”

Just like the classes in library science, all rehabilitation counseling classes are asynchronous, allowing the student to “attend” classes online at any time. In addition to traditional textbooks, multi-media, discussion boards, and video and audio lectures from faculty are used. The program is quite popular, with 339 students receiving their master’s degree since 2004, when the online program was established, growing from 37 students enrolled in 2004-05 to 95 enrolled in 2011-12, according to data supplied by Jackie Rogers, program coordinator of the Rehabilitation Counseling Distance Learning program. In fact, one of the main reasons for offering the program online was that the “on campus” program could not meet the high demand for enrollment outside of the central Kentucky area. Since the online program was established, students have enrolled from over half of the states in the United States and plans are in the works to reach out to an international student population.

Judging by the continued increase in enrollment, this trend might well continue, particularly if UK alums like Poole continue to spread the word about her satisfactory experiences with the program.

“I have recommended the UK online Rehabilitation Counseling Master’s Program to several rehabilitation professionals who are required to return for the degree to maintain their present employment or seek promotional opportunities,” says Poole.