

# One Giant Leap

\* Bisk makes a good FIT online.

The Florida Institute of Technology (FIT) was founded to train NASA personnel at what is now Kennedy Space Center. The school grew quickly, paralleling the explosion of space technology.

Now, 50 years later, Florida Tech is taking one large leap into online education. The rigorous technical institute is offering 16 bachelor's and master's degrees programs to students who will never have to set foot on campus.

FIT is partnering with Bisk Education, the Tampa-based company that works exclusively with traditional, not-for-profit universities to deliver degree programs online. Founded in 1971 to provide continuing education to accountants, Bisk expanded into the distance education frontier 10 years ago when it founded the University Alliance ([www.universityalliance.com](http://www.universityalliance.com)). The move was a good one: today, Bisk employs 540 and is the largest Internet advertiser of online degree programs. The company projects \$130 million in revenues in 2008.

Bisk employs a proprietary learning management system to translate traditional courses to video-based streaming lectures with live discussions, tests and required assignments in eight-week modules.

"It takes us about six months to bring a university online," says Adrian Marrullier, executive vice president of sales and marketing. Bisk ([www.bisk.com](http://www.bisk.com)) helps



Bisk Education/University Alliance

**HOME SCHOOLED** The Florida Institute of Technology offers an online option for the campus-weary.

recruit students, collect tuition, deliver video lectures and develop new programs as requested by FIT professors, who "have been ruthless in their demand for enhanced quality," Marrullier says. The professors communicate online and post grades, and the students can still walk in FIT's graduation ceremony.

An inaugural batch of FIT/University Alliance students began coursework in March; the new programs are expected to increase the university's off-site student population by 50 percent in the first year.

Online learners are the fastest growing category of college students. According to a Sloan Foundation study, 3.2 million students were enrolled in online courses in 2006, nearly 20 percent of the college student population. Online enrollment is growing faster than traditional enrollment and gaining wider acceptance. In 2006, 62 percent of academic leaders rated the learning outcomes as the same or better than traditional outcomes, the Sloan study reported.

The degrees are gaining employer acceptance, too. John Zappa is senior vice president for learner services for the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning ([www.cael.org](http://www.cael.org)) in Chicago. The international non-profit manages tuition benefits for companies with more than 5,000 employees, and assisted 57,000 adult learners who went back to school last year. "Some of the most popular programs are those that Bisk and other online providers offer," Zappa says. "The quality of edu-

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ation is there, and employers have come to that realization.”

The Bisk online MBA costs \$27,000 and can be completed in as little as 16 months. Bachelor’s students study for a more traditional 3.5 years, and pay \$410 per credit hour. Military personnel pay a discounted rate.

FIT provost Dwayne McCay says the online degrees enable the school to fulfill its founding mission to serve adult learners. As FIT ([www.fit.edu](http://www.fit.edu)) celebrates its 50th year, McCay says he’s excited about the 21st century technology, “which is going to be key to fulfilling our original mission, going back to our roots.” ■