By John Hanc

Nov. 1, 2018

Three months after a terrorist attack in Afghanistan left Jeremy Haynes a paraplegic, he met with a psychologist from the Department of Veterans Affairs. “He asked me what I wanted to do with my life,” said Mr. Haynes, a retired Army major. “I said I wanted to go back to school. He said, ‘Let’s be realistic. You’re not going to be operating mentally like you did before.’”

On Aug. 5, 2014, a gunman had sprayed bullets from an assault rifle into a military delegation visiting an Afghan military academy. Maj. Gen. Harold J. Greene was killed; Mr. Haynes was struck with four bullets and was among nine Americans injured.

Mr. Haynes, now 34, said the psychologist’s assessment of his mental acuity was based on his poor performance on a cognitive test he had taken during his rehabilitation. “I thought to myself, `That number doesn’t define who I am,’” he said. “`I’m going to show you.’”

Today, he is studying for his doctorate in business administration at Walden University, which specializes in online education. “I knew I didn’t want to go back to school in the traditional sense,” said Mr. Haynes, who uses a wheelchair. “I didn’t want to be a distraction in the classroom. I didn’t want people to have to hold the door open for me, or worry about parking.”

He had prior experience with distance learning. Although Mr. Haynes, a native of Albany, Ga. who now lives in Fort Belvoir, Va., had pursued his bachelor’s degree in a traditional classroom-based program — at Fort Valley State University in Georgia — he had later earned his master’s in business administration online from Florida Institute of Technology in 2013, while in the Army. He also earned a certification in program management while deployed as a member of the 82nd Airborne Division.

“I could log on any time, in the middle of Iraq,” he said. For the convenience, the flexibility — and now because, “it puts a veil over my disability,” Mr. Haynes says he prefers taking classes through the screen of his laptop.

Of course, the idea of adults taking classes remotely is not new. “When I started, they called them ‘correspondence courses,’” said George Haber, an adjunct professor at Vaughn College of Aeronautics and Technology in Queens. “And that’s what it really was. Students would send in their work handwritten, you would write them back.”
In the 1990s, he recalls, the first forms of online classes emerged, although the systems were still slow. Today, such popular online platforms such as Blackboard or Moodle allow for much improved discourse. “In the true online class there’s a lot of interactivity,” said Mr. Haber, who teaches classes in technical writing and communications.

Now, according to an annual survey by the Babson Survey Research Group and the Online Learning Consortium, more than 6.3 million students took at least one distance education course in the Fall 2016 semester (the most recent academic year for which data is available). That’s 31.6 percent of all higher education enrollments, according to the study, and about half of them were taking all of their classes online.

Many of these students are traditional age. But for adult students (generally defined as those 25 and over, working full-time jobs or with parenting responsibilities) online education is a particularly attractive option. Citing several studies, Louis Soares, chief learning and innovation officer for the American Council on Education, says that about a third of all adult students — roughly 13 million — are pursuing advanced degrees online.

“I think it has given adult students more opportunities,” Mr. Soares said. “If done correctly, online education can create a robust learning experience.”

Research has shown that students can learn as well online as they can in a face to face classroom, according to Jovita Ross-Gordon, a professor at Texas State University.

“In terms of pros and cons, it offers great convenience and access for populations who might not otherwise have it,” said Professor Ross-Gordon, an expert on adult education. “But a certain degree of self direction is required. And it can be isolating for some folks.”

The vast majority of colleges and universities in the United States offer at least some online classes, but there are still those who question its legitimacy and also the quality of for-profit colleges whose curriculum is offered solely online.

Walden University, where Mr. Haynes is earning his doctoral degree, is one such institution. He said that he researched the school through the V.A. and other sources, and heard positive reports from a friend who was also pursuing his doctorate in business administration at Walden, which Mr. Haynes learned was accredited by the Accreditation Council for Business Schools.

For Manda Gibson, online education is the preferred mode of learning. “I love it,” said Ms. Gibson, 45, the mother of four, who works full-time as an instructional designer at Simpson College in Indianola, Iowa. Ms. Gibson is pursuing her master’s in business administration online with Colorado State University-Global Campus, and before that earned a bachelor of arts in management, taking mostly online classes, at Simpson.

“When I sit in a regular class, my mind wanders,” she says. “`Did I do this for my kids?’ ‘What am I making for dinner tonight?’ When I do online, I can say, ‘this hour is my hour.’”
But she says, with the flexibility of online education comes responsibility.

“You have to take it seriously,” she said. “Some people think online classes are easier. I think it’s actually more work. Because you might have to spend more time with the content.”

Time is a commodity that Mr. Haynes, like many adult learners, has little of. He and his wife — Sgt. Chelsea Aiko Haynes of the Army — have six children, ranging in age from 1 to 17. He is also active with the Semper Fi Fund, a nonprofit organization that provides financial assistance for catastrophically injured servicemen and women. But most days, after the children are off to school and his wife is at her job at the Pentagon, he sits down in the living room with his MacBook Air and gets ready to learn.

“I open the blinds to get some natural sunlight in,” he said. “The TV’s off, the phone’s on vibrate. And I commit myself fully to my studies.”

Online Learning Tips

Here are some tips for success in online education for adult learners, from Jeremy Haynes and Manda Gibson, two students who have flourished in this learning environment, and from George Haber, an adjunct professor at Vaughn College in Queens, and a veteran of over 25 years of
teaching online.

**SET ASIDE** specific time periods when you can do required reading or writing and stick to the schedule, whether it’s an hour a night three nights a week; Saturday or Sunday morning; or some combination.

**GET ACQUAINTED** with your academic adviser from the start, as he or she is your lifeline for anything at the institution.

**CHOOSE A SUBJECT** for your first online class that you’re interested in, if possible. You will be more likely to become engaged in the material and learn the technology.

**ASK QUESTIONS** and reach out for help early. Don’t get frustrated if you don’t understand something; a quality online program will not only have self-help tutorials, but also good student services to help with the details.

**TAKE PART** in any online discussions or forums. Your lack of participation will be easily noted by the instructor.

**Correction: November 1, 2018**

*An earlier version of this article misspelled the surname of a student who is pursuing her master’s in business administration online with Colorado State University-Global Campus. She is Manda Gibson, not Gipson.*

A version of this article appears in print on Nov. 3, 2018, on Page L10 of the New York edition with the headline: Easing the Pressure