

**Real estate courses on Net-** *The Baltimore Sun* - Dec. 2002  
State panel OKs plans for distance learning

**'It clearly is the trend'**

Agents, brokers may take credits for licensing in '03

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Real estate agents and brokers in Maryland could start taking required education courses over the Internet or by mail next year in a move aimed at making licensing requirements for industry more convenient.

The Maryland Real Estate Commission approved plans last week to allow certain continuing education courses to count as credit outside the traditional classroom. Called distance learning, the program is similar to Internet teleconferencing and other educational courses offered by colleges and other schools that allow individuals to study and take examinations in their homes or offices.

Maryland's 30,000 real estate agents and brokers typically are required to take 15 hours of continuing education every two years to renew their licenses. Programs such as fair housing, legislative updates and environmental hazards are some of the subjects that agents and brokers can take. Courses are offered throughout the state by real estate companies and independent schools.

All schooling in Maryland currently is offered in classrooms. The classes can cost as little as \$15 for a three-hour course and more than \$140 for the 15-hour program. Similar costs are expected for online courses, several real estate school executives said.

Internet education has grown during the past few years and is starting to take off in the real estate community.

Experts said that more than 40 states offer programs over the Internet as a way to expand the number of people who enter the real estate field. In Virginia, courses that teach people to become a real estate agent are offered through satellite means, as are continuing education classes.

Executives who develop the programs said the courses typically are used by agents who live in rural areas and must travel to attend classes.

"This really expands their market and opens up real estate education to a larger number of people," said Evan Butterfield, publisher and director of distance learning for Dearborn Real Estate Education, a Chicago-based company that develops courses.

And real estate experts said they hope it's the beginning of more automation in the industry so that agents and brokers could some day take licensing exams over the Internet in Maryland.

"It clearly is the trend – it's happening everywhere," said Steven VanGrack, chairman of the Maryland Real Estate Commission. "There is no end to where it's going to go."

If approved by a legislative committee next year, agents and brokers could take courses on the Internet by June at the latest, commissioners said. State lawmakers passed legislation asking the commission to draft guidelines for the training.

Some real estate experts said the programs will give the industry an opportunity to offer various levels of education to agents and brokers who have taken the courses several times. For example, a national real estate agent who is considered an expert in fair housing could narrate a program that is offered online, experts said. Participants must sign an affidavit that they took the course.

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***"Evan Butterfield, publisher, distance-learning director***

"We just see it as another option and another way to serve our members," said Jody Landers, executive vice president of the Greater Baltimore Board of Realtors. "It allows some more flexibility to be creative. It's going to take some time before it is embraced."

Several real estate companies offer their own continuing education programs and offer similar courses online in other states. Some experts said online programs can be more difficult, because many of them have quizzes and other exercises that must be completed before the program progresses.

"I will say the online courses generally take as long – if not longer – and they do have tests, and they can be more rigorous than the in-classroom class," said Bill Frost, director of the Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage school of real estate.

Some real estate agents said the continuing education courses can be boring because they've taken them so often. And many agents put off the course work until their license renewal deadlines is days away. Some said they would welcome the opportunity to take the courses online as a convenience.

"It could be an outlet for some people who have waited until the last minute," said Pat Hiban, an associate broker with Re/Max Advantage Real Estate in Howard County.

Most real estate schools are embracing the programs, saying they can make money the way they do now, only online. But some school officials oppose the need to have each program approved by the Real Estate Commission, saying it will make the programs more costly to agents and brokers.

"If I'm going to offer it in CD-ROM and in a book and online – that's three different approvals," said Edward J. Smith, who owns Ed Smith Real Estate School in Ocean City. "I just requested that they put something in the program that if it already has

been approved online for other states ...Maryland should just say OK. If they're already approved and successful, that's one way to cut the costs."

Executives at the Maryland Association of Realtors pushed for the change and said their members have requested a more convenient way to meet their licensing requirements for years.

"There's no question that it's the wave of the future," said Mary Antoun, chief executive officer of the Maryland Association of Realtors.