When I first started writing about online education several years ago, the concept was still in its infancy with few students, a handful of programs and lots of hype. Today, online education is on the brink of exploding into an entirely new way to learn, get a degree, land that dream job or promotion and get connected to colleagues and mentors.

Some Orange County-based educational institutions have been on the frontier of online education, creating new ways for learning in our increasingly wireless lifestyles. For even more inspiration to earn that much-needed degree, here's why these online degree programs are some of the best in OC:

UC Irvine Extension's Spa and Hospitality Management Certificate Program is the only program of its kind anywhere, garnering praise from the spa industry itself. “This program is the only online, instructor-led certificate program in the United States catering to the needs of aspiring and practicing spa and hospitality managers,” says Kathy Tam, UCI Extension's marketing and communications manager.

With the spa industry expanding, UCI Extension saw the need for spas to recruit and build competency with their employees. “In fall 2005, the university started with 4 online enrollments,” says Tam. “By summer quarter of 2007, online enrollments increased to 181, an accomplishment considered out-of-scale growth for a program of this type.” In addition, UCI Extension’s Spa and Hospitality Management Certificate Program is endorsed by the 2 biggest names in the industry: Susie Ellis, president of SpaFinder and Nancy Griffin, founder of SpaTrade.com.

Among many online programs, DeVry University is proud to offer a traditional 4-year degree program — all done online in as little as 3 years. These year-round courses are broken up into 3 semesters, with a bachelor's degree program requiring 124 to 138 credit hours. DeVry is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission of North Central Association, which accredits other top-notch universities such as Purdue and Northwestern universities.

National University started its online program in 1996 and has developed more than 40 online programs, including an online MBA program. However, National is also known for its online Master's of Forensic Science program.

Science, it seems, is a natural for online learning.