



## Distance Education How to Be a Star Student in Cyberspace

BY KAREN GILES-SMITH, MS, RD

There's a good chance that online learning is in your future. The number of online and partially online courses is quickly growing. Currently, 81% of U.S. colleges and universities offer at least one fully or partially online course and 34% offer online degrees. Distance education is a long-term strategy of most schools—an indication that the cyber classroom is not a passing fad. So, if you decide to pursue another degree or take courses to keep current, you'll be one of the 2.35 million online students in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Why are students logging on to learn? The convenience and flexibility that distance education affords is a boon to those with tight schedules. Getting dressed and getting to class is not required. Students can log on at any time from practically anywhere. Distance education offers these benefits and more—but also a few challenges. Knowing what to expect and how to prepare for online learning will help you meet the challenges and improve your chances of success.

### CYBER MYTHS

The biggest misconception about distance education is that it's a quick and dirty way to get an education. Many first-time online students are unprepared for the rigors of reading, writing, and ruminating in cyberspace.

"The convenience of online learning is that you can do schoolwork at home in your PJs," says Robert Woods, JD, PhD, assistant professor of communication at Spring Arbor University. "But that's where the convenience ends." Many students are surprised to find that learning online is more time-intensive than learning in a traditional "bricks and mortar" classroom. Although there's no drive time or conventional lecture, substantial time must be dedicated to reading texts and discussion threads and participating in online discussions. Woods recommends a "two-for-one rule": Plan to spend at least two additional hours on schoolwork for every online credit hour. For instance, a three-credit online course takes eight to 10 hours per week at the graduate level and 10 to 15 hours per week at the doctoral level—minimum.

In addition to more time, online courses require more effort. "Online is not easier," Woods cautions. Learning to communicate effectively online "is like learning a new language and a new skill set." But the extra time and effort is worth it. According to research cited in *Learning Together Online: Research on Asynchronous Learning Networks* by Starr Roxanne Hiltz and Ricki Goldman (Eds.), online learning is as effective or more effective than traditional classroom-based learning.<sup>2</sup> "The nature of online learning provides for greater depth and breadth of interaction with the material," explains Woods. "So, it's a better value. You get more knowledge for your money."

### PROFILE OF A SUCCESSFUL STUDENT

Being a successful online student doesn't require advanced technical skills or a particular learning style. Rather, those who are internally motivated, take personal responsibility for their learning, are organized, and enjoy interacting with others

are more likely to do well and feel satisfied with the experience. Even if you possess these traits and skills, you can further improve your chances of success with an organization overhaul and a time management tune-up.

Sandra Johnson, a master's degree student with many online classes under her belt, says, "I had never tried to juggle a full-time job with full-time school. I quickly became stressed out, overwhelmed, irritable, and not much fun to live with. If I could offer one piece of advice to the future online learner, it would be to manage your time effectively." Organization and time management skills can be self-taught. Johnson has benefited from the book *First Things First: To Live, To Love, To Learn, To Leave a Legacy* by Stephen R. Covey, A. Roger Merrill, and Rebecca R. Merrill, a guide to assessing life priorities and goals and making time for what's important.<sup>3</sup> Keep in mind, however, that if you have too much going on in your life, online learning may not be right for you at the present time.

## COMPARE TO PREPARE

Carefully matching yourself to an online program is also crucial to success, according to Judith T. Brooks, PhD, RD, assistant professor and coordinator of dietetics and human nutrition programs at Eastern Michigan University School of Health Sciences. "You should shop for your education like you shop for a car," she says. To find a quality product that's compatible with your situation and that meets your needs, be sure the institution is accredited by reputable agencies, then comparison shop. At the undergraduate level, Brooks believes the program director's role is to help students determine what they want out of the program and how to get it. When researching graduate education, there may be more to consider, such as redefining career goals in light of personal interests, skills, and the job market.

Brooks says a good place to start investigating online degree courses/programs in nutrition is the American Dietetic Association's Web site, [www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org) (click on "Careers & Students," "Advanced Degree Programs," and "Listing of Programs Offering Distance Education").

That's what Tamar Lampert, RD, did when she was looking for an online coordinated dietetic program. She then contacted program directors for information and asked whether she could talk to individuals who were currently enrolled or had successfully completed the program. "Choose an established program or course that has the details already arranged for course materials, practice-experience paperwork, and general procedures," Lampert says. "You don't want to be a guinea pig."

## SET YOURSELF UP FOR SUCCESS

Once you've selected a program, there are several things you can do to ease your transition into the virtual classroom. Consider the following tried and true tips from veteran online students.<sup>4</sup>

- **The logistics of logging on:** Be sure your computer is compatible with the operating system. If your computer capabilities aren't up to par, ask for assistance from the school's technical support team, the company where you purchased your computer, or your local computer store.

- **Pace yourself:** Take one online class at a time until you find your rhythm. Once you learn how to manage your time, try your hand at two online classes per semester. Most people who work full-time can handle one or two online classes, depending on family obligations and other commitments.

- **Learn the basics:** Your first online class should be an orientation to online learning. (If a program doesn't offer one, be wary.) Skipping the orientation course almost guarantees failure—and you don't want to risk getting discouraged.

- **Carve out a special space:** Before your first class begins, find a comfortable place where you can concentrate, stock it with office supply essentials, and set up a simple filing system.

- **Find your way around:** You may need a day or two to learn how to navigate the computer courseware. Before your first class, take the online tutorial or ask your professor how to get started.

- **Sift through the syllabus:** As soon as the syllabus is available, study it to get a handle on content and expectations. Get a jump on the reading assignments, if possible. You'll start out on the right foot, feeling more calm and capable.

## Know What You're Getting Into

Are you ready to be an online student? Take the following free "online readiness" assessments:

- [www.onlinelearning.net](http://www.onlinelearning.net) (click on "How Online Learning Works," then "Is Online Learning for Me?")
- [http://slin.suny.edu/slin\\_rightforyou.htm](http://slin.suny.edu/slin_rightforyou.htm)
- [www.terra.edu/academics/distancequiz.asp](http://www.terra.edu/academics/distancequiz.asp)

- **Take it personally:** Develop a personal mission statement. With your priorities and goals clearly in mind, you'll stay motivated and on track. Try the free Mission Statement Builder in the "Library & Resources" section of [www.franklincovey.com](http://www.franklincovey.com).

If it's the right time in your life and you've found the right program, this advice can help prepare you for the unique challenges of online learning. In the words of one online student, "Get ready for the ride of your life!"<sup>4</sup>

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## REFERENCES

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