Online Education — Is It Right for You?

Whether you've just graduated high school, are currently working a full-time job and looking for ways to increase your personal marketability, or are looking to change careers by building upon your existing education and experience, online education is a cost-effective way to meet your goals without having to worry about some of the time constraints often associated with attending classes at a physical university.

The online university, commonly known as distance education, has changed the face of higher education over the past few years, enabling people of all ages, cultures, and backgrounds to realize their goal of earning a college degree. And if the rapidly-increasing enrollment is any indicator, online programs will only continue to grow as accredited universities adapt their current curriculum, catering to this newfound market.

What to consider before signing up

The idea behind online education is the same basic idea that you'll find at the root of almost everything offered online: simplicity. The accommodations and flexibility of online education seem to make it an ideal solution for those looking to further their career.

Is it right for you?

Some students find they're not able to complete the coursework once they begin. So before you start requesting information, you can save yourself a great deal of time and effort by keeping in mind some key considerations related to your end goal, your personal habits, and the time you can afford to dedicate to the process of online learning. These factors boil down to three primary concerns: technology, time, and self-motivation.

Technology

Most of us have become pretty savvy with using the Internet. After all, you found this article, right? But online courses will often use a number of advanced programs, ranging from the Microsoft Office suite and Adobe products to cloud-based message boards and workrooms that enable students and instructors to collaborate outside a classroom setting.

When considering online education, be honest with yourself about your personal level of tech competence. Are you someone who can sit down and follow menus and online directions? If so, then the tech side of online learning should pose no problem. But if you have trouble making sense of new programs and have to spend time figuring out how to operate basic functionalities, an online system of learning may actually cost you more than a physical classroom due to the extended amount of time and effort you're putting in.

Time

As anyone who routinely works on large projects can tell you, one of the biggest stumbling blocks you'll encounter is the time it takes to finish a task, an aspect that's compounded through the often technical aspects of completing coursework online. At a physical university, students are required to participate in lectures and lab work that last for a pre-established and specific duration. As such, everything else that occurs within that timeframe takes a backseat, leaving the student to contribute their full level of attention and alertness to the course material. This structure is removed in online learning (often to the joy of those who excel at it… and the potential failure of those who don't).

Online universities allow you to view and complete work on your own

time, as long as the required outcome is submitted on the deadline. Students are free to read their course material or watch streaming lectures online from the comfort of a favorite chair or the local Starbucks. The problem many people experience here can be attributed to one of the most basic human struggles: procrastination.

Some who have found difficulty in completing online coursework have reported a temptation to put off work in lieu of other activities, whether it's a job, a boyfriend or girlfriend, or any of the other distractions readily present outside a dedicated learning environment. So again, be honest with yourself. Many online universities will provide an estimate of the time required to complete the assigned coursework. Does this fit into your schedule? And more importantly, will you be motivated to complete it on your own?

Self-motivation

That brings us to the last (and often most important) consideration. Think about the tasks you set for yourself on a daily basis. Whether it's working out, reading a book, or cleaning out the refrigerator, these solitary tasks require a great deal of self-motivation. Because let's face it: there's always something more fun to do.

A quality system of online education will pair you with other students to complete group projects, enabling you to work with classmates online, but you'll still be doing the majority of the work on your own. So if you struggle to complete projects, online education may be a pretty big challenge.

If you're unsure exactly how you might fare, take a single course before committing to an entire program and try out the process for yourself. Sign up for something you're interested in and see how it

goes. If you have trouble staying on schedule, you may want to consider other options. But most participants have found it to be a positive experience, with each course they take enhancing their resume and personal growth.