

Millions of students will be going back to school in the fall, but not all of them will be sitting at desks taking notes while a teacher lectures in the front of the class. Instead, at least 3 million of them will be sitting in front of computer screens, most likely at home, taking courses via distance education, some of them for credit and others just for the love of learning.

If you've never taken a distance education course, there are ways to find out what you need to know to have a good online experience—before you make a commitment.

Universities and colleges that offer distance education courses may consider this an unfair benchmark, but if an institution does not have an obvious home page link to its online program, that should give pause. I checked several university websites in conducting research for this article and was surprised to find that some institutions did not promote their distance education program from their home page. That made me wonder how much support online learners would get after signing up for a course.

That is just one of several benchmarks anyone contemplating enrolling in an online course should consider. Support is a critical matter and it affects students in several ways, both before and after enrollment.

One university I checked takes a very pro-consumer approach, offering a seven-question survey that not only tallies your score but tells you whether or not you're an appropriate candidate for online learning. The university also offers sample courses, which enable you to determine how user-friendly, including ADA compliant, the site is. And while computers have become easier to use, someone who just bought a computer should take a computer course before trying an online course. Computers and online courses both have learning curves that should not overlap.

One of the most basic pro-consumer benchmarks is making sure prospective students have technology that is compatible with the course format. Every site I looked at provided that information, although not always with the degree of equivocation I would prefer. In a fairly typical post, one university said it supported computer platforms going back to Windows 95 and a variety of browsers, including some early versions. If a student has outdated software, such information is helpful, but part of your investment in an efficient online education should be for up-to-date tools. I run the most current release of Windows and my course design is based on that, not something from a decade ago. Regarding browsers, I've worked with course management systems that don't tolerate Internet Explorer on a Mac and the students have had to find a new browser in order to stay in the course they had already paid for. Another course management system I'm familiar with had some problems (since fixed) with Netscape on PCs and Macs. Consider the cost of your computer operating system (and necessary browser software) part of the course fee—subtle perhaps, but a cost nevertheless.

Then there's the minimum standard for connection speed—a 28.8k modem. I consider that Stone Age slow, and would not want to commit to an online course at that speed even for a local phone call. The tortoise may win the race in the fable, but when you connect to the Internet, the hare is always superior.

Related to speed is how much time you'll have to spend online. The distance education provider should give that information in a syllabus you can access before writing a check. The syllabus should not give just an online time estimate, but what you will have to do online versus what you can do on your own. Are you able to do assignments offline and then turn them in during a short period of online time? Does the course include streaming video, which is best viewed over a rabbit connection and in limited chunks? Is there a textbook you can read on your own or must you spend a lot of time online to read course material? Do you have the right software to read the course material? One university I checked cautions students to make sure they have Adobe Acrobat Reader because that's the format for some course material. Yes, it's free, but it's also nice to be told this upfront before writing a check. What other software might be needed that you don't have?

If the material is online, can it be downloaded for later reading? I took an online course that had two textbooks I could read on my patio and a variety of online readings, all of which I downloaded so I could read and highlight at my leisure. Too much time online spoils a course. The online time should be focused on interchanges with fellow students and the instructor, not passive activities. And before you enroll, determine how much time you will need for interaction with your classmates. Will it be only in message boards, which you can post to on your clock, or will you also be expected to show up in a chat room with others at a specific time? That should be in the syllabus.

Are you always going to be using the same computer? What happens if you travel? I once had a student from Saudi Arabia who spent two weeks in Japan and made sure she had continuing access. Another online student once sent the class a note from poolside in Las Vegas, revealing that she had bought a laptop just for that situation.

But I've also had students who did not plan ahead. One took his vacation the week of finals, intending to return to his only computer on the last day that the final could be submitted. Alas, his car broke down and he did not get back on time. If you can't take a laptop with you, check in advance to see what other Internet connections are available. (I submitted this story via a wireless connection in a delicatessen I had pinpointed before visiting in Arizona.)

And check to see how much flexibility you have in completing assignments. In my online course, students work on topics over three 48-hour periods, beginning on Sunday afternoon and ending on Saturday at 11 p.m. A mistake that first-time online learners make is confusing a correspondence course and a cohort course. I've had

students in courses who thought they could do assignments when they felt like it. That's a correspondence course. But I teach a cohort course, meaning all students must participate in all assignments within a given time. Beware of the distance education programs that boast "anytime, anywhere." That isn't always the case. When I was checking universities for this article, I found some that went to great pains to explain the different types of courses so students did not take the wrong course. I like that pro-consumer approach.

One thing that is not always evident is who your classmates will be. In distance education, you can't pin down a definition of a typical student or course focus. You could sign up for a course that's heavily weighted toward the typical college student. Or you might find yourself in a course with senior citizens, military personnel, international students, degree-seeking students who are not near a conventional campus, high school students who are home schooled or who are getting a leg up on their college education, or professionals seeking to increase their knowledge or get recertified. Given that distance education courses are designed to be student driven, your classmates can affect your experience. I once took a distance education course with an international group of adults, many of whom were working and too busy to post on time. Those who were earnest were so few that I did not find the course very stimulating. Given the cost of any course, you want to get your money's worth. But keep in mind that the variety of backgrounds and experiences of the members of the class can be a big plus, giving online discussion fresh perspectives.

Yes, there is a lot to consider before taking an online course. A good overall guideline: The more a university's distance education site focuses on the pre-enrollment needs of the prospective student, the more comfortable one should feel about taking a course there.

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