Challenges of Online Education

Enrollment in online education is at an all time high, according to a recent study by the Sloan Consortium. Based on responses from more than 2,200 colleges and universities across the U.S., the study reveals that 3.2 million students took at least one online course in the fall of 2005, an increase of 850,000 more than the year before. The report is available at www.sloan-c.org/publications/survey/index.asp.

With the rise in popularity of e-learning comes some unique challenges not extant with more traditional classrooms. Students need to be aware of the differences between online and traditional classes and be prepared to make the necessary adjustments. Significant challenges faced by online students include the following:

- Technical problems. Computer hardware and peripheral devices such as printers, modems and routers are not indestructible; as with any other man-made device, they can break down or malfunction at the most inopportune time. In addition to equipment failure, an older computer may be incompatible with some software required for the course. Viruses, trojans, spyware and other malware could infect a computer, causing it to run poorly or not at all. A slow internet connection might cause problems logging into class, retrieving and submitting assignments, and posting to threaded discussions. Any of these problems could cause a great deal of frustration for the student trying to complete course assignments. Therefore, it is important for the student to have access to a backup computer to use in case of equipment malfunction.

- Staying motivated. Going to school always requires a certain level of motivation from a student regardless of whether it?s a "bricks-and-mortar" institution or online class. In a traditional classroom setting, a student has live, face-to-face interaction with the instructor and fellow students -- a camaraderie that may help boost enthusiasm and motivation for the course. In an internet-based class however, there is no live contact with instructor and classmates -- the student works alone in a virtual environment. This lack of live contact may lead to a feeling of isolation, and make it difficult for a student without a high internal commitment or personal drive to stay motivated during the course.

- Self-discipline. As with motivation, a student needs good self-discipline to succeed online. The freedom and flexibility of e-learning is what's so attractive to many people. There's no obligation to login to class at any particular time or place -- you can go to class and do your assignments whenever it's convenient for you. However, this same freedom can lead to procrastination, and cause the unwary or undisciplined student to fall behind in his assignments. Once behind, it can be difficult to catch up.

- It's difficult to improve oral communication skills. There are many classes such as speech, drama, debate, teacher education and so forth that require the student to make oral presentations in front of a group of people. With online courses this is not practical, as the classroom is virtual, and the students are not all gathered together at one time in one room. A student wishing to improve oral communication skills may need to take these classes in a traditional classroom course.

- Classes with lab or hands-on requirements may not be available online. If a lab course cannot be simulated or practically offered online, a student will need to take the course at a local college campus or other location with the necessary facilities for completing the course work.

Students considering taking online courses need to be aware of these and other challenges, and be prepared to meet them in order to be successful online. If any challenge seems insurmountable, the student should reconsider the online option and perhaps take a traditional ground-based course instead.

Short note about the author

Jesse Whitehead earned his B.S. in Business Administration from an online university in 2005. For more information about online education visit http://onlineschoolsreview.com.