

Interested in learning about how to select an online program, how to successfully complete an online degree or certificate program, and how to effectively sell the online degree to a future employer?

With a slowly recovering economy and high unemployment, more people are using online educational programs to learn new skills in order to transfer into new careers or advance in their current fields. Approximately one fourth of the 19 million students enrolled in higher education were enrolled in at least one online course during the fall of 2008. This was a 17 percent increase from the previous year, according to a 2009 report by Sloan Consortium and Babson Survey Research Group. Today, online education programs have become commonplace, with more than 3,300 of the roughly 4,500 U.S. colleges and universities offering at least one online course. More than 1,700 of these schools offer completely online degree programs, according to a 2009 survey by Babson Survey Research Group.

How to Choose an Online Program

First and foremost, make sure the program is either regionally or nationally accredited by an established accrediting agency. The online degree and certificate programs should meet the same standards as traditional brick-and-mortar higher education institutions. The standards are determined by six regional accrediting agencies recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. Most online universities list their accreditations visibly on their websites. If it's not listed on the site, find the school's physical headquarters and contact the accreditation association for that region. Another consideration is the reputation and experience a school has within your specific career field of study. In addition to overall academic accreditation for the school, you should make sure that the department and degree programs have specialized accreditation by reputable professional associations, such as the American Bar Association and the American Dental Association. You can also search for the regional, national, and programmatic accrediting agencies in the Department of Education's [database](#) or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation's [list](#).

Accreditation affects a student's ability to transfer credits to another institution. If a student attends a nationally accredited school and wants to transfer to a regionally accredited school, it may be difficult to transfer credits, says Scott Traylor, the director of admissions for online education at Bryant and Stratton College, which offers online courses and has 17 campuses

across four states.

Access to a physical campus is another factor to consider when choosing an online program. Some universities, such as Walden University and Capella University, offer online instruction only, with no physical campuses, while other schools offer "blended" instruction that includes both online courses and classes at campus locations across the country, such as the University of Phoenix and DeVry University. "Some people are more comfortable taking online courses when there is an on-site location, knowing there is a physical location they can go to," says Steve Riehs, the president of online services at DeVry University, which also has more than 100 campuses nationwide. In fact, the Department of Education released a study in June 2009 that found that blended instruction was more effective at improving student achievement across a variety of subject matters than purely online or face-to-face instruction.

The quality of the faculty is also a key consideration in selecting a program, says Kenneth Hartman, the academic director for Drexel University Online. He recommends that prospective students research the background of the school's faculty, the number of full-time and adjunct professors, their accessibility, and their experience teaching in specific subject areas. He says you also want to have an instructor who has received training in how to teach online. "The quality of the faculty is ultimately what you're paying for," Hartman says. "You're paying for a knowledgeable person who's able to take the available technology and help you learn."

Online students are likely to face the same tuition and fees as students on campus, according to Babson Survey Research Group, which found the expenses the same at 55 percent of 1,700 institutions surveyed in 2008. However, students can save money by going to school online because they do not have to pay for the expenses of commuting to and from campus. Furthermore, many companies offer tuition reimbursement for employees who enroll in an education program that is relevant to their field of work, provided that they maintain a certain grade-point average, which could save money for those who take programs online.

"The eLearners Advisor" is an assessment tool that is a good resource if you're unsure if you're a good match for an online education program,, says Andrew Gansler, the website's president. This assessment determines your preparedness to enroll in an online degree program and helps you find online degrees that match your educational and career interests.

How to Be Successful in an Online Program

One of the strongest indicators of success in an online program is a student's level of self-motivation. "If you're looking at adults going back to school online, the most successful are those that are highly motivated. They also are engaged in the process and where it's leading to and understand that it is a career steppingstone," says Lisa Gualtieri, the editor-in-chief of *eLearn Magazine*, a publication by the Association for Computing Machinery.

Students have to be technologically capable in order to perform well in an online course. Students must have access to an up-to-date computer with internet capability and basic technology proficiency to navigate and interact with the learning management system that the school uses to run the online course. In addition to being email and typing proficient, they must also be competent at creating PDFs and combining video, text, and chat features within an online presentation, says Gansler.

Online courses are typically delivered synchronistically, where students may watch prerecorded course lectures on their own time schedules. The other course format is synchronistic, where students attend virtual live course lectures at specifically scheduled times. For both formats, students can view recorded lectures, talking PowerPoint slides, readings, and videos online for the designated course. Also, chat rooms and discussion boards are often used for students to discuss homework or coordinate group projects. "For synchronistic courses, because you don't have to be there for the live lectures, it makes it more important that you are self-disciplined," Gansler says. "Students also need a support structure from their friends and family to ensure success."

Other keys to success: Students have to set a time commitment each week in order to do well in an online course. Maria Andersen, the higher education editor for *eLearn Magazine*, suggests allotting at least eight to 10 hours a week for a three- to four-credit class. And check college E-mail, as essentially all communications are via E-mail, Andersen advises.

A major factor in an online course is being involved and engaged in online class discussions. "The beauty of taking courses online is that you can't hide online. A good instructor is going to monitor and evaluate you on the degree that you participate," says Hartman with Drexel University Online. "The tools to access learning and participation online are light-years ahead of what you can do while teaching face to face."

How to Pitch Your Online Degree to Employers

The acceptance of online education by employers is still a mixed bag. According to a January 2008 poll by Excelsior College and Zogby International, 83 percent of business executives surveyed said an online degree was as credible as one earned through a traditional campus-based program. However, there are differing opinions among hiring managers. While 49 percent had encountered an applicant with an online degree, only 19 percent had hired such an applicant, according to a 2008 survey by Vault, a career services provider.

Abigail Tremble, the director of learning and development for Randstad, a global staffing company, is an experienced recruiter who has worked with both job applicants and employers. She says employers are split down the middle: Half of them fully accept online degrees, and the other half don't. However, she says employers regard degrees earned from an online program through a traditional campus-based university more favorably than those from completely online universities. In fact, the traditional universities do not list on the diploma whether or not the degree was earned online because it is technically the same degree as the one offered on campus. Tremble says this gradual acceptance of online degrees is a significant improvement from 10 years ago, when she says nearly all employers questioned the credibility of online degrees.

"With employers, online schooling wasn't a problem," says Nicole Stephens, a graduate from Bryant and Stratton College who earned her bachelor's in business administration online. She got a job in the medical billing office of Kaleida Health in Buffalo the same month she graduated. "A lot of people are starting to go to school online now because it is more convenient. I don't think it's looked at any differently."

The technological skills students learn online are important for the job market. "Online education is very similar with how people do their jobs in today's global society," says Riehs of DeVry University. He says that he has seen a broad acceptance of online education among employers and that the university has the same job placement rates for their online and on-campus graduates.

When you reach a job interview, Tremble says, "be very prepared to talk specifically about what you learned during the courses, any projects you worked on. Show based on what you're talking about that you really earned a degree. Also, be sure to mention any certifications you earned while pursuing your degree."

In the job interview, be open to talking about getting your degree online, says Bill Driscoll, a district president for Robert Half International, a professional staffing and consulting firm. "You're selling yourself, so it is important to be upfront about your online education. There's a lot of ways to pitch it as a real positive. It shows the employer your dedication to developing skills and self-discipline."

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