

Evaluate Online Education

Most of the questions you should ask any school you are considering also apply to online education, but try to get information that specifically reflects the experiences of online students.

Understand Online Academic Policies and Expectations

- Can you take your entire program online or will you have to complete some requirements by attending classes, seminars or other events?
- Is there a time limit on completing each course? On completing an entire program?
- How will your learning be evaluated? Will you submit assignments online, through the mail, by fax or other means? Is testing conducted online or will you need to go to a proctored site for exams?
- What level of performance or progress will you need to show to remain enrolled? Is tutoring or other support available if you need extra help?

Look for Features that Help You Learn Online

- Does the institution provide self-assessment to help you determine whether you would like online learning before you enroll?
- Is there an online orientation to course requirements, navigation and procedures?
- Is the instructor available online or by phone, fax or e-mail? How long should you expect to wait for a response?
- Will you be able to interact with other students? Are discussions held "live" at scheduled times or will you communicate through listservs and threaded discussions that can be accessed anytime?

Find Out About Access to Information and Library Services

- Does the institution employ librarians to assist online education students? Is reference and other help available online or by e-mail or phone?
- Can you request materials from the institution's library? How quickly can you get them?
- Will you have access to online indexes and full-text databases in your field?
- Does the institution have formal arrangements for you to use local libraries that are prepared to handle your needs?

Ask How Administrative Support is Provided to Online Students

- Is it easy to contact someone to ask questions? Is there a course manager or toll-free telephone number?
- Are the following services available online: applying for admission, registration, changing or canceling courses, secure payment of tuition and other charges, ordering books and supplies or requesting a transcript?
- If services are not available online, what provisions have been made for online students to access them?
- Is the privacy of personal information you submit online protected?

Check Out Technical Requirements and Support

- What computer hardware, software or other equipment is needed?
- What type of Internet access is recommended?
- What prior skills are expected in using software such as word processing, spreadsheets, e-mail, statistical analysis or database programs?
- Is technical support provided if you have problems? Can you reach technical support staff in person? When is technical assistance available?

Ask Which Student Services Are Available to Online Students

- Are students enrolled in online education at this institution eligible for student financial aid?
- Will you be eligible for career planning and job placement? How are these services provided to students who are not on campus?

Investigate the School's Track Record with Online Education

- How long has this program been offered online?
- Will the institution continue to offer this online program long enough for you to finish?

You should be able to find the answers to many of these questions from the school's Web site. If the information you need is not available online, contact the school directly.