

Keys to Learning Online

Gigliola Insuasty Sepúlveda weighs in on the pros and cons of online learning

Traditionally, the idea of community consists of a

geographical place that provides people the opportunity to meet and socialize. With the advent of the internet, this concept has changed; geographical restrictions have disappeared now that technology supplies the means to meet and socialize. Whatever the medium, the term community still relies on one fundamental element — people.

A virtual community is a meeting within a “space” which enables people to connect, communicate, and get to know each other. Generally, these people have a common interest, and, in our case, that interest is learning. Normally, the space created by a virtual program is designed to motivate student participation and non-competitive collaboration to reach individual learning objectives.

Answers to Some Myths

Can you save a lot of time and money studying online?

Virtual education is not quicker than traditional education. Although students can save time and money by not having to travel to an educational center, virtual programs cannot be hurried through. A module scheduled for three months’ work will undoubtedly require that amount of time.

Neither is online education more economical. Virtual courses require more preparation and attention on the part of professors, so institutions are obliged to spend just as much on them. Generally, matriculation costs of a virtual program are equal to if not greater than those of their face-to-face equivalent.

Finally, online courses are not easier. Many students come to the conclusion that virtual courses are generally more exacting than are their traditional counterparts. There is no excuse for failing to hand in work. Students who get seriously involved in a virtual course often find the experience more stimulating and must develop new collaborative learning and working techniques in order to adapt.

Is there any interaction with fellow students or professors?

The majority of virtual students are surprised to discover that in reality they manage to have more contact with their peers than in many traditional courses. Written answers sometimes turn out to be more honest and sincere than in face-to-face social situations.

The better virtual programs are those that promote exchange and interaction among students. Almost all professors confirm that running a virtual course requires more effort than standing in front of a class as they sometimes need to be on-call 24/7 to respond to motivated and enthusiastic students.

Do you have to be a computer whiz?

Not necessarily. In many cases, computing and technology are the least important aspect of the program. The tools used in virtual courses are very easy to handle and they generally come with detailed instructions on how to use them. After overcoming the initial technology “shock,” the course soon becomes very similar to a traditional program requiring a similar amount of work and dedication.

Is everyone likely to succeed as a virtual student?

No. Virtual education is not for everyone. The success of a virtual student depends on aligning study style and personality with the demands of the academic program. A mixture of flexibility, persistence, and hard work is required along with factors like personality, needs, motivation, time, energy, and family commitments.

Who is our typical virtual student (at Fundacion Universitaria Iberoamericana — FUNIBER) and what are their characteristics?

Although they come from all walks of life and from all over the world, students at FUNIBER are usually hard workers looking to improve their professional qualifications. They are self-motivated, technologically adept, ready to commit their time and energy to the program, believe in the system of learning outside of the traditional classroom, communicate well in writing, and effectively communicate their needs and worries.

Challenges of Virtual Programs

■ Isolation

Perhaps the most common challenge facing the virtual student is a feeling of isolation. To varying degrees, most consider theirs a solitary battle. Of course, during traditional programs, students must study alone at home into the early hours, but the next day they have the opportunity to socialize in person with colleagues. For those who especially enjoy social interaction, virtual study can seem an isolating experience. Nevertheless, many students value their participation in virtual courses that have given them the opportunity to create friendships in other countries which would never have happened otherwise.

■ The commitment of time and effort

Although virtual education makes studying more convenient, it doesn’t make it less arduous. It is true that students don’t need to get to campus, but that doesn’t mean that the need for hard work has