

Questions Students Ask About Distance Education

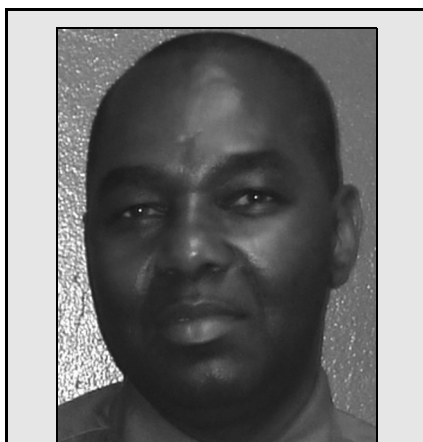
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INTRODUCTION

As society has entered the age of globalization, the way individuals communicate and conduct business has changed. As Renard (2005) stated, "No generation has ever had to wait so little time to get so much information" (p. 44). Technology has made it possible for this generation of students to access information on any subject without having to go to the library or looking at books. Students can use the Internet to access primary, secondary, and tertiary resources that are unavailable in public and private

libraries as well as in bookstores (Nellen, 2001). As a result, technology has created opportunities for people who once lacked flexibility to pursue advanced studies without disrupting their family and work schedules.

Colleges are thus transforming how they deliver instruction. Lambert (2006) noted that the popularity of distant education in the United States has gradually forced colleges to become global providers. Competition among colleges for students is no longer a regional turf battle; instead, "institutions that can deliver the most convenient and relevant educational services will dominate" (p. 1). However, amidst easy access, students must be careful in selecting the college or university at which they want to pursue their online degree program because serious problems can accompany distance education. Red flags student should look for include: accreditation; track record; admission policy; class size; credit worthiness; the institution's response to specific questions; qualifications of faculty to teach a distance course; level of interaction between instructor and students; level of student services provided; what current students and graduates say about the program; content, materials, and presentation; quality of the educational experience; and expense. Apart from these items, student learners should conduct a self-evaluation to ensure that they can handle the challenges, in terms of motivation and self-discipline that distance education requires.



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ACCREDITATION

Learners need to become familiar with issues that are relevant to distance education. One such issue is accreditation. What is it and what does it look like? Accreditation is the verification of the quality of an educational institution's "entire program by outside evaluators" (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2003, p. 16) and a critical issue for distance education providers. Different forms of accreditation include national, state, and regional. Regional accreditations, such as those of the North Central Association and Southern Association of Colleges and Schools are most widely accepted. Further information on checking the legitimacy of accreditors can be found at the United States Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. Students can also check with the Distance Education Training Council (DETC) to verify a school's accreditation.

Another important issue facing distance education students is transfer credits. As Lambert (2006) noted, "The acceptance of the academic credits by other academic institutions earned via distance study is a problem" (p. 2). Lambert warned that if the provider is not nationally or regionally accredited by a recognized accrediting agency such as DETC or regional accrediting agency, the likelihood of the learner later transferring credits is nil.

As informed consumers, students can verify if a university or college is properly licensed and approved in the state where it is located (Thomas, 2006; Simonson et al., 2003).

Foreign students who are enrolled in distance education in the United States must take particular care with this as there are dozens of unrecognized accreditors operating in the United States who give worthless accreditation to their client colleges. Sadly, most of the students who enroll in these distance education programs reside outside the United States and are ill-informed about U.S. accreditation

procedures (Lambert, 2006). Additionally, distance education students should ask for the name, address, including e-mail and Web site addresses of the college's accrediting agency and state licensing agency, and keep this information for future use should any problem arise, since U.S. federal law mandates that recognized accrediting agencies give such information to prospective students (Lambert, 2006).

DOES THE DISTANCE EDUCATION INSTITUTION HAVE A TRACK RECORD?

According to Thomas (2006) distance education has evolved rapidly; and this makes it difficult to judge the quality of programs based solely on longevity since many good programs have just started. Consequently, some relevant questions students can ask about the course they want to take include:

- Has the course been taught before?
- Who is teaching the course?
- How reputable is the institution?
- Will the credits be transferable to other colleges and universities?
- What colleges and universities accept credits from your distance education program?

Another pertinent query learners need to make concerns the refund policy. Will part of the money be refunded if the student quits the course? If the answer is negative, it is your signal to enroll with another provider (Lambert, 2006). Simonson et al. (2003) remarked, "Any reputable institution offering distance education will have a system for registration, instruction, assessment, grading, and reporting" (p. 175). Hence, students must check this information before they enroll in or begin to take a formal distance education course. Students' queries should not be limited to course material or credits but should also cover the obtaining and shipping of textbooks as well as the precise hardware and

software necessary for their personal computer. Institutions with experience operating worldwide will answer these questions.

ADMISSION POLICY

Consumers need to be alert and avoid giving permission to anyone to automatically deduct fees from a personal credit card. One recommendation is that consumers pay fees as they are due. According to Thomas (2006), consumers need to look out for programs that admit students with few restrictions, give credits for all the things they've done without careful scrutiny and then charge an exorbitant tuition. It is important to note also that some institutions award credits for past experience but only after careful and close evaluation. Lambert (2006) made the observation that learners can ask permission to visit a class for a short period to see if it is to their liking.

In addition, students must investigate the total costs and charges they'll pay. They should ask about tuition payment policy since payment options vary at different institutions. Frequently, some institutions have hidden fees that are not disclosed by their catalog, such as transcript fees, activity fees, or virtual library fees. As a consumer you need to know the total cost up front.

CLASS SIZE

Freed from the restrictions of a physical classroom, some distance education providers place many students in one class. This is problematic because the more students per instructor, the less attention per student. Thomas (2006) stated that to have more than 25 students per instructor presents a problem for the professor and can overload the system. Instructors will have a difficult time handling the workload in this class size since contact between instructor and students in distance educa-

tion is very demanding, time consuming, and critical. Overloading also affects the quality of the instruction. Queries concerning promptness, efficiency, and competent instructional service must be made before commencing an online program.

WHERE CAN I FIND A LIST OF ONLINE DEGREE PROGRAMS?

The World Lecture Hall (<http://www.utexas.edu/world/lecture/index.html>), a clearinghouse maintained at the University of Texas, is a useful resource for potential distance learners. Other useful resources include *Thorson's Guide to Campus Free College Degrees* and *Peterson's Guide to Distance Learning Programs*. Swiss (as cited in Thomas, 2006) recommended that students' interests drive their search and that they should scrutinize the course content before signing up. If the content information is of poor quality, move on. In an attempt to capitalize on the growing population of distant learners, "some institutions will focus on high demand fields without much regard for whether or not they possess the expertise" (p. 3). A recommendation from Kohl (as cited in Thomas, 2006) is that students become wise and collect information from recognized accrediting agencies and professional societies about the history and performance of distance education providers as a means of assessing quality.

HOW IS INSTRUCTION PRESENTED AND HOW ARE ASSIGNMENTS SUBMITTED?

Most institutions present content in many ways including video presentations, chats, group activity, reading followed by threaded discussions, assignments, and group projects after each unit. These units are created using instructional design and most courses are divided into 10-15 modules. Modules contain the assignments such as quizzes, reports, presentations,

and term papers. Faculty must provide distance learners with handouts and course-work before the beginning of the class session. Learners should be self-motivated and active in completing assignments in a timely manner.

More recently, audio and videos have been integrated into online courses. Professors save video and audio clips to DVDs and mail them to students to be used as part of the instruction. The students then retrieve sections that are applicable to the instruction. Additionally, course content is dispersed via electronic mail or placed on a course Web site. Students also work collaboratively in groups and interact regularly with other students in the course (Simonson et al., 2003).

Distance learners utilize several methods to submit assignments. Most assignments are submitted as attachments to e-mail. At other times, they are sent on a DVD or a hard copy is mailed to the instructor. Projects are posted to the course Web page and then retrieved by the instructor. Electronic submission is preferred since instructors can provide quick feedback to students about their progress. Learners should never forget to ask questions about the electronic libraries and databases that are made available to them.

DO YOU HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO BE SUCCESSFUL?

Students who learn at a distance are a special kind of student. A common characteristic of these learners is a commitment to learning. These are individuals who are self-directed, who are intrinsically motivated, who are abstract learners, who have internal locus of control, and who frequently have practical experience in their field (Simonson et al., 2003). Discipline is another shared trait. Some distance education programs rigorously challenge learners with copious reading and writing assignments including threaded discussions and term papers, so the notion that

distant learning is easy is definitely not true. Assuredly, individuals who procrastinate will experience difficulty. Thus, distance learners must be prepared to commit substantial numbers of hours each week to be successful.

Lambert (2006) developed a set of questions to help prospective students understand if distance education is for them. The questions are as follows: Do you enjoy talking with friends about current topics in a debate style? Do you perform jobs immediately or do you have to be reminded more than once by others? Do you prefer receiving the news reading the paper rather than from the television? When engaged in a project, do you research questions on your own rather than telephoning an expert for answers? Do you stay late at work when you're engrossed in a task, rather than "punch the clock" and leave at "quitting time"? Are you compelled to read a book to the end as opposed to stopping reading when it gets boring? Do you tend not to finish a project until you're satisfied it is the best work you can do before starting another project? Do you prefer to walk alone in the park or walk with a friend or two? When doing the crossword puzzle, do you research for a clue or consult a friend for the solution? Lambert suggested that each yes has a value of two points, so a score of 16-18 is an indication that the learner is highly likely to succeed, 10-14 points suggests that the learners is likely to succeed, at 4-8 points uncertainty sets in, and fewer than 4 points is a red flag that distance learning is not for the individual.

WHAT TECHNOLOGIES ARE REQUIRED?

Since not all students have the latest technological equipment, distance education providers make every effort to deliver their program in a straightforward way. Students, however, should be able to manipulate the Internet comfortably and be

relaxed if glitches occur. It is paramount for instructors of online courses to allow distance learners to practice using the technological resources applicable to the course, such as the "dropbox" for turning in assignments, asynchronous discussion platforms, or Web-based quizzes. An important issue providers should also consider is the fairness of the assessment activity. Simonson et al, (2003) noted that instructors should avoid penalizing distance learners by requiring them to use resources not available to them or by expecting them to adhere to different protocols than students in a face-to-face setting.

WHAT DO DISTANCE LEARNERS WANT?

Students need quality service and access. DiPaolo (as cited in Lambert, 2006) noted that the attributes that attract distance learners are: real-time and delayed options; well-designed, engaging, and intellectually challenging courses; seamless, available, and reliable delivery technology; emphasis on student-centered rather than on teacher-centered approaches; high levels of interaction, including problem-based simulations; participation in a learning community through interaction with the instructors and classmates; interactive, highly engaging, and well-crafted courses; and student support and academic advising services that are convenient, accessible, and easy to understand.

CHEATING AND TESTING

Individuals who want to cheat will cheat, be it in traditional or distance education. Over the years, institutions providing quality distance instruction have eliminated objective forms of testing and have developed more comprehensive methods of student assessment. Alternative assessments, such as portfolios, projects, and

reports, may provide a better indication of what students have learned. Simonson et al. (2003) suggested a number of ways to overcome the limitations of assessing students at a distance, including delivering a test online in a timed or untimed environment, or having on-site verifiers such as school administrators, librarians, workshop supervisors certify that students have taken the test and have complied with the test protocol.

CONCLUSION

Lambert (2006) emphasized that as new technology becomes available, online providers will utilize the new technology to deliver their courses to distance learners. Students, however, will have to be vigilant to find out important information about the institution in which they want to enroll. As informed consumers, students can begin to use technology to gather information about a provider's accreditation status. They should always triangulate their findings to verify their accuracy.

Students must be cognizant that distance learning demands that they work independently without prompting, since providers of distance education tend not to push and motivate individuals to learn. Staying on task is critical, since learners can lose awareness when they're not interacting with individuals in the course. If students are dissatisfied with their progress, they should contact their instructor and, if the problem remains unresolved, students should contact their instructor's supervisor (Simonson et al., 2003). Students must remain focused and become skilful in managing time to be successful in distance learning.

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