Are You Ready for Online Learning?

10 Steps to Prepare for Success in an Online Degree Program
“Begin with the end in mind.”
– Stephen Covey

Are you ready to transition into a new career or move up to the next level in your current job – and you know that a college degree will help you do that?

Maybe you’re thinking about enrolling in an online degree program because you need flexibility in pursuing your education while working and meeting family obligations.

If so, you have a lot of company. Research shows that the number of students taking at least one online course continued to grow to more than 6.7 million last year – an increase of 570,000 students over the previous year.

But you might not know very much about online learning. You’re wondering if it’s for you. Do you have what it takes to be successful in an online degree program?

Purpose of this e-book

While scores of textbooks have been written about online learning, the purpose of this simple, easy-to-read guide is to present you with information about some of the fundamental issues you should be considering as you investigate online degree programs. It’s concise – a quick read that should take just a few minutes out of your busy day – and will lead you through 10 steps that will help you prepare for success in an online degree program.

So let’s get started!
About Saint Leo University

In 1889, Saint Leo University was founded by the Order of Saint Benedict and chartered by the State of Florida. Since then it has remained one of the nation’s premier Catholic, co-educational, liberal arts universities, serving people of all faiths and backgrounds.

Our scenic, 150-acre University Campus is located in the heart of Florida, just 30 miles north of Tampa and 90 miles west of Orlando. We have 19 regional education centers located throughout California, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia.

Core Values

Since Saint Leo’s founding, the university’s aspiration has been to provide students with one-on-one attention, flexible learning opportunities, and a solid foundation for personal fulfillment and career advancement.

To assist students in becoming successful scholars and citizens, Saint Leo emphasizes these core values:

- Excellence
- Community
- Respect
- Personal Development
- Responsible Stewardship
- Integrity

The Center for Online Learning

Saint Leo University is a leading provider of online education to working adults and is a major global provider of education to the military.

The Center for Online Learning at Saint Leo was established in 1998 to meet the growing needs of adult students. With approximately 3,000 matriculated students, the Center for Online Learning offers the best attributes of traditional face-to-face education in conjunction with today’s most innovative computer technology.

All Center for Online Learning students receive the same educational degrees as campus-based students. With students participating from around the world, the Center offers a truly global classroom experience.

Maximum Flexibility 24/7

Through the Internet, Saint Leo provides students with the opportunity to advance their education without having to travel to a traditional campus – no conventional classroom attendance is required.

Share this e-book:
Contents

Step 1
Consider the online learning environment ................ 5

Step 2
Find an accredited program ................................ 6

Step 3
Understand how you will be learning .................... 7

Step 4
Talk with an admissions counselor ....................... 8

Step 5
Explore academic support services ....................... 9

Step 6
Be computer ready ....................................... 10

Step 7
Evaluate your reading and writing skills ................ 11

Step 8
Get organized ........................................... 12

Step 9
Plan how you will manage your time .................... 13

Step 10
Pursue your passion .................................... 14

Conclusion .................................................. 15

Additional Resources ...................................... 16
Step 1

Consider the online learning environment

It sounds ideal. Working on a research paper in your pajamas. Being home to tuck the kids into bed and then going online to catch up on coursework.

Given the challenges of balancing family and work responsibilities with educational goals, the flexibility of online degree programs makes them appealing to a growing number of adults.

Online learning presents different challenges than traditional classroom learning. Before you get started, it’s important to understand what’s involved so you know what to expect.

ONLINE LEARNING IS ENGAGING.

Online education is not about replicating a classroom lecture and reading it on a computer screen. Quality online education courses are carefully designed to directly engage students with the content, each other, and the instructor. A wide range of delivery modes is used, including e-mail, web conferencing, and discussion forums.

ONLINE LEARNING IS PARTICIPATORY.

Many online students say they feel more involved in online education courses then they ever did in traditional classes. No one can sit in the back of a large lecture hall and hide. All students are required to participate by posting regularly to discussion boards. In addition, just like face-to-face classes, online classes often include group projects.

ONLINE EDUCATION IS CHALLENGING.

For regionally accredited institutions to keep their accreditation, all of their programs must maintain high academic standards. Online courses are at least as rigorous – and sometimes even more challenging – than classroom-based courses. While online terms are typically shorter than on-campus semesters, students generally spend 9-12 hours per week on each course.
Step 2

Find an accredited program

While accreditation does not guarantee employment, some employers want students who have graduated from regionally accredited institutions.

Regional accreditation is considered the “gold standard” of accreditation. It is the highest form of institutional accreditation a college or university can obtain. If you attend a regionally accredited school, you shouldn’t have to worry about your degree being accepted by employers or graduate schools.

Some schools are nationally accredited. National accreditation agencies evaluate specific types of schools and colleges that have a common theme – nontraditional colleges such as trade and career schools, and certain online colleges.

For-profit universities and vocational schools focused on a specific field of study may be nationally accredited. National accreditation can also be earned by specific programs within a regionally accredited institution. This is different from national accreditation of schools.

Keep in mind that it can be difficult to transfer from a nationally accredited school to a regionally accredited school. Regionally accredited schools usually do not accept credits from a nationally accredited school.

There are many online education programs that are presently unaccredited, so it is important to ask about the institution’s accreditation status.

You can check accreditation status by going to either the Council for Higher Education Accreditation website (www.chea.org) or the U.S. Department of Education website (http://ope.ed.gov/accreditation/Search.aspx)
Step 3

Understand how you will be learning

Online courses take different approaches to providing content. This means that when you enroll in an online program, you will be using myriad technologies to learn.

For the most part, students connect to courses via a learning management system, e-mail, discussion boards, and links to course materials. Students and instructors connect through threaded discussions and e-mail to share information.

Since students can access learning materials anywhere and at any time, this type of learning provides the convenience and flexibility of doing coursework on your own schedule – with time to research and reflect before providing a response, perhaps, to a discussion board.

However, there could be times in some courses when you may need to be at your computer on a specific day and time to participate in “real time.”

With web conferencing, for example, all students in the class have their webcams running so the instructor can post students’ headshots on the screen during a class discussion. A web conference could also involve live streaming of a speaker with a question-and-answer session at the end. Everyone participates at the same time but from different places.

Keep in mind that both types of learning require structure and discipline to complete assignments and meet weekly deadlines, as well as weekly presence, involvement in discussion boards, written assignments, and tests.
Step 4

Talk with an admissions counselor

One of the first steps to take in your quest for a college degree is to talk to an admissions counselor. Here are some specific issues you may want to discuss.

**ACADEMIC SUPPORT SERVICES.** What kind of orientation does the school provide? Are there online library services, tutoring, or other learning resources? Will you be assigned an academic advisor? How does the academic advising process work?

**YOUR DEGREE PROGRAM.** Are there any special professional accreditations? Does it recognize transfer credits? Are there opportunities for earning credit for prior learning experiences?

**FACULTY.** Are instructors part of the institution’s core faculty with a mission to deliver the same academic quality and service to online students as to campus students? What are their credentials? Are they easily accessible? What is the student/faculty ratio?

**OTHER STUDENTS.** Are they adults who are serious about their education? Where are they located? Will your virtual classroom be a global one so that you can benefit from diverse perspectives?

**STUDENT SERVICES.** Are there opportunities to connect to other students and to faculty through social networks, clubs and organizations, or peer mentoring?

**FINANCIAL AID COUNSELING.** Are knowledgeable advisors available to step you through the financial aid process, offer guidance about loans, grants, and scholarships and keep you informed about changes in federal or state aid?

**TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE.** Is there a 24-hour help desk support?

**CAREER SERVICES.** Does the institution offer career services for online students? What types of services are available?
Step 5

Explore academic support services

If you were planning on taking on-ground classes at a traditional college, you would most likely take the time to visit the campus before enrolling and learn about available academic resources. You might check out the library, the learning resource center or writing center, and meet with an advisor.

You should do the same thing before enrolling in an online program. Begin by exploring your institution’s website. Is professional tutoring available to online students and how accessible is it? Will you have full access to the same library and research resources as on-campus students, including e-books, professional, scholarly and trade journals, reference assistance and research collaboration with library staff?

It’s important to understand that as an online student, from the time you’re accepted until graduation, your single, most-important resource can be your academic advisor.

Similar to a traditional academic advisor, an academic advisor for an online degree program assists with the entire gamut of academic planning issues.

- Setting realistic goals.
- Deciding on a major.
- Selecting courses.
- Keeping you on track with graduation requirements.
- Developing long-range academic planning.
- Providing accurate information about curriculum, policies and procedures.
- Monitoring your academic progress.

Undoubtedly, you will meet and learn from numerous faculty members during your college career and may develop great relationships with many of them. Your academic advisor, however, will be your personal, ongoing resource – someone who will reach out to you regularly and help you discover your strengths, abilities and skills – throughout your educational experience.
Step 6

Be computer ready

Generally speaking, all you need to access most online courses is a computer – PC or Mac – with a reliable, high-speed Internet connection, up-to-date web browser, and CD/DVD drive. Most computers manufactured within the last few years can provide you with the speed and memory you will need for online learning.

That said, it’s important to check with your university to make sure your computer meets the technical requirements for your specific degree program.

You may have all the right hardware and software needed for online learning, but how comfortable are you with technology? You don’t need to be a techno whiz to be successful at online learning, but you need to possess some basic technical skills and be comfortable navigating technology to be successful.

If you’re not, consider enrolling in a basic computer skills course prior to your first online course. Or test the waters with one class. Build your confidence. And then add more as you move forward.

You will also need to take time to learn your course software, called a learning management system. Universities use learning management systems to manage, track and deliver courses. Common features include discussion boards, announcements, course content, assignments, assessments, and other sections.

Most universities offer an orientation to their learning management system that you’ll need to complete before you begin class. Ask questions so that you are comfortable before you need to start posting assignments and discussion responses.
Step 7

Evaluate your reading and writing skills

Effective reading and writing skills are essential to being a successful online student.

From discussion posts to journal articles and library resources, you will be spending a lot of time reading complex and demanding materials.

Textbooks may still be used in online courses, but you can count on reading large amounts of material online. Keep in mind that there is a difference between reading text on paper and reading on a computer screen. Many people find online reading more challenging.

Just as reading assumes a greater role in online courses, so does writing.

Almost all communication that takes place in an online course is through writing. Classroom “discussions” and “chats” are not talking and listening to other students. They’re writing.

Most instructors require that you contribute a certain number of posts and responses to a discussion board each week, as well as participate in regular online chats. And e-mail will be a lifeline to your instructor and to other students.

The good news is that if you tend to be somewhat reluctant to engage in a discussion in a traditional classroom, you might be more comfortable online.

Online discussions give you the opportunity to develop and organize your thoughts into a clear and concise response. You can even develop a brief outline before answering questions, whether they are submitted in discussion forums, writing assignments, or via e-mail.
Step 8

Get organized

For some of us, to-do lists and calendars are part of our DNA. For others, a day planner or calendar app is a total anathema.

If you’re the latter, realize that becoming an online student will require a drastic change. Prepare to organize yourself well on three levels: your online course, your computer, and your offline work.

First, your coursework. As mentioned in Step 6, you’ll probably need to take some general training to become acquainted with your school’s learning management system. This is a great opportunity to learn how to use the array of internal organizational tools these types of systems offer.

Second, you’ll need to learn how to effectively organize yourself via your computer with folders and files. Create a folder with your school’s name and add a document with important notes such as phone numbers, usernames and passwords. Create a sub-folder for every course you take. You can also add a folder to your Favorites/Bookmarks in your web browser for important websites.

You will want to get into the habit of backing up your files often on an external memory device.

Finally, plan on organizing yourself for offline work by having a folder with a hard copy of your schedule, syllabus and notes. Keep your textbook and course materials with you so you can use any downtime during the day for studying. You’ll be surprised at how much time you can pick up waiting for appointments or during your lunch break.
Being an online student often requires even more work than traditional classroom courses. With weekly assignments, discussions, and reading, you can plan on spending approximately three hours per credit a week. That’s about 9-12 hours per course per week.

As a working adult, perhaps with children to take care of and family obligations that eat through the hours in your day, you may feel as if that’s an impossible task.

It’s not impossible, but it does require three things.

**SACRIFICE.** Every day has just 24 hours. Chances are you will need to give something up to integrate coursework into your schedule. Decide now what it’s going to be, keeping in mind that like anything worthwhile doing, school involves sacrifice.

**SUPPORT.** Being successful will require support from others to help you focus on your education. Will your aunt pick your daughter up at school? Will your husband handle weekend chores? You need a plan so you know what time you will have each week to complete assignments. And to do that, you’ll need a “little help from your friends.”

**DISCIPLINE.** Business coach and author Brian Tracy said discipline is doing what you should do, when you should do it, whether you feel like it or not. With online learning, you determine how much time you spend studying, and when you study. Without the structure of a traditional classroom, can you stay on top of assignments? Can you make a schedule and then stick to it?
Step 10

Pursue your passion

What is your vision for your professional life? Does that vision get you excited? Is it something you feel passionate about?

Are your interests, personality traits, abilities and values aligned with that vision?

And do you have a series of goals that will turn that vision into reality?

Realize that reaching your goals and achieving your vision is going to be a long-term journey of small daily steps. You need to be sure you are on the right path and that embarking on an online degree program is the right first step.

Online education is challenging because it puts more responsibility on you, the student. Without a doubt, online courses require a higher level of discipline and motivation than most traditional, classroom-based learning.

The U.S. Department of Education recently published a report called, “Promoting Grit, Tenacity, and Perseverance: Critical Factors for Success in the 21st Century.” The report said that these factors are “essential to an individual’s capacity to strive for and succeed at long-term and higher-order goals, and to persist in the face of the array of challenges and obstacles encountered throughout schooling and life.”

Students who are usually successful in online education courses are those who enjoy learning independently, are highly motivated, and possess good study skills.

But success also requires grit, tenacity, and perseverance.

And those qualities are a lot easier to muster up if you’re passionate about your vision for your life. It means there is meaning and purpose to your hard work, sacrifice, and commitment.
Conclusion

We hope that you found this guide useful – that it has given you a better idea of the issues you need to consider before starting an online degree program and some simple steps you can take to prepare for a successful online learning experience.

Now it’s time for you to identify the program that is the right fit for you – the one that will help you pursue your passion and achieve your career goals.

With more and more schools offering online courses and numerous for-profit universities vying for your attention, we hope that you will consider Saint Leo University’s online programs.

Saint Leo University has been serving on-campus students for more than a century and online students for more than 15 years.

We would love to welcome you to the Saint Leo community.

Saint Leo University wishes you all the best in finding your passion, pursuing your educational goals, and achieving success.

To consider Saint Leo University, you can visit us online at online.saintleo.edu.

You can also call to speak with one of our enrollment counselors at 888.875.8265 for undergraduate admissions or 800.707.8846 for graduate programs.
Additional Resources

To learn more about becoming a successful online student

- The Consumer’s Guide to Online Colleges - www.geteducated.com
- The Best College and Degree Search - www.matchcollege.com

To brush up on your computer skills

- Computer Basics - www.gcflearnfree.org/computerbasics
- Basic Online Skills - www.ctdlc.org/remediation

Tips for time management

- www.time-management-guide.com
- www.studygs.net/index.htm
- www.mindtools.com/pages/main/newMN_HTE.htm

Two software tools you may find helpful

- Adobe Reader will enable you to read PDF documents. Download from http://get.adobe.com/reader
- Adobe Flash Player is an application that will enable you to connect with certain types of interactive content and watch videos. Download from get.adobe.com/flashplayer

Free and easy online test to help identify your learning style

- www.edutopia.org/multiple-intelligences-learning-styles-quiz

Two free organizational tools

- Organizational tool for online students: www.toodledo.com
- Creating folders and files: www.top-windows-tutorials.com/windows-tutorial05.html

For help with writing and communication skills

- How to Write Professional E-mails: www.ehow.com/how_2159648_write-professional-emails.html
- The Core Rules of Netiquette: www.albion.com/netiquette/corerules.html
- What is Plagiarism: www.plagiarism.org

General study strategies

- www.studygs.net/enews

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