Guide to Online Learning
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Supporting Your Online Educational Journey

From the days of kindergarten through high school, and even into college, for most of us education has been the traditional, sit at a desk and listen to a teacher experience.

You went to school and sat in a classroom or lecture hall on a firm schedule. When the teacher was finished or the bell rang, you picked up your books and walked out, either heading home or to the next class.

It’s no wonder that steeped in the traditional, brick-and-mortar education experience as we are, the idea of taking college classes online can create some unease and raise questions.

Is it a real college? Do I get a real diploma? Can I talk with my teachers? Or classmates? Are there assignments? What do employers think of online degrees?

And how does all this work, anyway?

Here we will attempt to soothe some of your unease, answer your questions and help guide you through this next chapter in your education.
Possibly as far back as the 1700s, and certainly by the middle of the 1800s, learning outside a classroom setting has played a role in education, often for those unable to travel to school. Early distance learning classes were taught by mail, and over the next two centuries correspondence courses provided the channel for distance learners at the collegiate level and beyond.

As technology has evolved, so have the educational options of people unable to be present for the on-campus setting. By the mid-1920s, major universities had begun offering classes over their own radio stations.

Forty years later, it was the telephone, only to be followed a few years after that by instructional TV. When the Department of Defense created the Internet in 1969, few people really understood what it was, let alone fathomed the extent to which it would impact not only education, but every facet of modern life.

The period from 1976 to today has seen a rapid evolution of teaching by way of computers and the web. The online learning process has been fine-tuned to a point that now more than ever, students do not need to sit in the presence of professors giving chalkboard lectures to receive the degrees and credentials that can help their professional career reach heights they’ve always dreamt of.
Perceptions of online learning are changing.

The addition of online degrees and courses offered by some of the country’s top academic institutions, combined with changing employer perceptions that online learners may be better at balancing their personal life with other obligations, has made taking an online degree into the job market increasingly valuable.

Employers have begun to accept online education as being of equal merit to that of a brick-and-mortar institution. The degrees offered by 100% online programs are no different than degrees received by on-campus students.

According to an Online Learning Consortium survey of 2,800 academic leaders released in 2015, 71.4% say the learning outcomes in online education are the same as or superior to face-to-face classes.

A U.S. Department of Education report released in June 2014 showed 5.4 million college students – or about one in four – were enrolled in online education courses in 2012, the latest academic year studied. Those students were almost evenly split between those taking at least one online class and those enrolled exclusively online.

Accreditation plays an important role in determining the validity of an online education. It recognizes a college’s ability to maintain standards that are necessary for graduates to transfer or continue their education with other reputable universities or to attain credentials necessary for their profession. To ensure the school you are looking at is properly accredited, make sure its accreditation is approved by The Council for Higher Education or the U.S. Department of Education.

Regionally accredited schools like New England College hold the gold standard of accreditation. New England College is accredited by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), the same accrediting body as Harvard University. Once accredited, online schools can offer credits that are widely accepted for transfer, are eligible for corporate tuition reimbursement plans and provide instructor-led courses.

“If a student comes to NEC, they will know that all the credits that they earn are transferrable to other colleges and universities, and if students have credits from other accredited colleges, we will in turn accept those credits.”

Brad Poznanski, Vice President of Enrollment

www.newenglandcollegeonline.com
Benefits of Online Classes

- **FLEXIBILITY:** If you’re looking to go back to school while maintaining a career and family life, online learning is an ideal way to get to where you want to go. Online courses have deadlines for homework and exams, but course materials and requirements can be completed at the student’s pace. At New England College, there are no mandatory log-in times and professors are often available to talk if a personal matter is interfering with your progress.

- **AVAILABILITY:** The number of schools offering degrees and certificates earned online has increased steadily in recent years. You can shop around for an experience that will best suit your needs. On top of that, NEC’s virtual classroom can be accessed 24 hours a day, seven days a week, from virtually anywhere.

- **NO COMMUTE:** Students who live off campus incur the extra expense and time for transportation to and from class. That time you spend commuting might be better spent studying, working or tending to your personal life.

- **SELF-DIRECTION:** As an online student, you have complete autonomy over your academic aspirations, choosing the time, location and pace to complete your work.

- **VARIETY OF OPTIONS:** Online courses are taught in disciplines such as psychology, criminal justice or accounting and offer an aspiring student the means to earn their degree.

- **LOCATION IS IRRELEVANT:** Students can select the degree and college they want no matter where they live. Students with a job or family are not limited to schools within commuting distance, opening more options to find programs and colleges that fit their needs.
Guidance and Support

This is not the typical college experience. At times it can be tough to navigate your way to graduation day without a little guidance. Fear not, there are plenty of people dedicated to doing just that.

**TALK TO YOUR PROFESSORS**

Correspondence with professors is not only available at New England College, it’s encouraged. A tremendous resource for feedback, knowledge and guidance, professors and fellow students interact via online discussion boards, chat and email.

In some cases, the experience may need to be personalized, something NEC can accommodate. For Angela Trench, an NEC graduate, professors even made themselves available by phone.

“One valuable take away from this program for me is the way in which the professors are available to help through e-mails or their own cell phones,” Trench said. “Some of the professors gave their home number so they could be contacted if we couldn’t reach them by other means. This program is definitely designed to help anyone further their education without going into a classroom setting.”

**GET TO KNOW YOUR STUDENT SERVICES REPS**

As you begin your journey with New England College, a staff of highly knowledgeable professionals is there to help you, from enrollment and academic advising to finding assistance to pay for school. Advisors will regularly reach out to online students to offer help, but it’s up to you to accept that help and make the most of a valuable resource.

The experience of working with a student advisor has helped many a student see their way through hard times outside of academics to the payoff of graduation day. For Trench, struggles with her health proved to be an obstacle to her ability to study and her motivation to finish, but with the help of an advisor, she was able to overcome those issues to earn her bachelor’s degree in psychology.

“Sometimes I would feel like I can’t do this or this is hard because of health issues,” Trench said. “But then my advisor would call and he would say ‘you can do it, I know you can.’ He would call me sometimes just to say hello and see how I was doing. I give him a lot of credit, because at times when I was tired and felt like I couldn’t push myself, he was there pushing me on.”
Who are NEC Students?

Kristina DiMartino, BA in Business Administration/Marketing
Class of 2015

“I studied on weekends and early morning when the kids were sleeping. During the week it was so manageable because you have the guidance from your professor and you knew what was due for each class.”

What makes a great candidate for online learning is like asking what makes a great car. The answers are as diverse as the options, it’s just about finding what is right for you and what you want.

Full-time professionals, single parents, caretakers for homebound patients, rural residents, military personnel, the unemployed – people who may not live near a college campus – are some of the students earning a degree online. Anyone who checks at least one of those boxes will find that an online education can help further their professional lives or greatly improve the credentials they put on their resume.

For Kristina DiMartino, an associate’s degree earned after high school was a valuable asset that helped secure a career in sales and marketing for the better part of 20 years. During that time, she was dedicated to raising her two daughters and working full time, always hanging onto the dream that she’d one day return to school. In 2011, she suddenly found herself without a job and competing with candidates for new positions that all had one thing she didn’t – a bachelor’s degree.

“After extensive research and finally building up enough courage to realize that at 44 I could finally pursue my bachelor’s degree, I decided on NEC. Classroom attendance was not an option, so an online program was the best fit for my family and I,” she said.

The flexibility of online learning makes it ideal for anyone with a busy schedule or trouble getting to and from a traditional campus. For DiMartino, just taking a single class at NEC was easy enough to juggle with her work and home life.
“By taking just the one class every seven weeks it made it extremely manageable,” DiMartino said. “I was able to continue working full time. My kids are very active in sports and I was still able to take them where they needed to be. I studied on weekends and early morning when the kids were sleeping. During the week it was so manageable because you have the guidance from your professor and you knew what was due for each class.”

The biggest factor in online success is merely desire. In the majority of cases, time can be made, technical hurdles cleared and money found. Online students must possess the drive to succeed or their efforts may not get much further than simply connecting to the web.

Crystal Hunter is the embodiment of that spirit. Following a workplace injury that resulted in two ruptured discs in her back, multiple surgeries and lengthy recovery periods, the mother of three found herself eventually unemployed and on disability, unable to do so much as sit at a desk without experiencing pain. But for Hunter, finishing the degree path she had started prior to that fateful day in 2010 was not optional.

“I’ve been doing it in bed,” said as she prepared to complete a Bachelor of Science in Healthcare Administration from NEC. “I have about a thousand pillows. Sometimes I can’t type being propped up. I have to lean over on my side. It takes me a lot longer, but I tell my children they don’t have to be the smartest kid in school, they just have to be the hardest worker. How can I tell them that and not do it myself?”
Get Your Boss On Board

Actually getting your employer to sign off on the time and financial assistance to go to school and attain a degree may not be as easy as simply asking. Here are some tips to get them on board.

• **TEST THE WATERS.** See if any of your colleagues have received education benefits. Ask how they approached superiors and what hurdles needed to be cleared to get the process started. Also, consult your employee handbook for policies surrounding this benefit as there may be academic standards to uphold or a loyalty contract to repay your employer for their investment in you.

• **MAKE A BUSINESS CASE.** You’ll want to create a need for your employer to help you down this path. Creating a value proposition in which you highlight tangible ways your education will support company goals will help. Think ahead to questions you may face and devise answers that show both long- and short-term benefits.

• **BE REALISTIC.** Employers are going to have certain expectations, so selling them on providing you time and money may be tough. Be persistent and truthful. Be clear on the time requirements you will need, the exact costs to be covered and explain in exact terms why you have chosen the school you want to attend.

Virtual Study Groups

Being an online student does not mean having to give up all of the benefits of the college experience. Collaborative efforts and learning from your peers can be possible in an online setting. It may simply take a bit more effort on your part to experience it. One good way to do this is setting up virtual study groups using applications such as Google Hangouts or ThinkBinder with a variety tools you can use to create an online think space for you and your classmates.

Here are some rules to follow when putting together a virtual study group.

• **IDENTIFY A MODERATOR.** Have one person lead the group’s discussions, organize materials and help everyone maintain their focus on the group goal. This role can be rotated so that it is shared over the course of a semester.

• **DEVELOP AN AGENDA.** Set up at least one regularly scheduled activity to get all participants on the same page. Include a wrap up of the session and an introduction of things to come.

• **ASSESS MEMBER STRENGTHS.** Whether it’s note taking, organization, time management or summarization, each group member has different strengths. Each member can make their own contribution to the group and receive help from others.

• **STAY POSITIVE.** Some sessions will be extremely helpful, while others may frustrate the group. It’s important to keep things encouraging, maintain focus on the group’s goal and continue pressing forward.
Time Management Tips

Online students sometimes struggle with the freedom the online experience provides. Being able to fit school into the open portions of your schedule is a good thing, but you have to possess the discipline to stay on task and organize your schooling in a way that still leaves you some free time for friends and family. Here are some tips to help you do just that.

**CREATE A STUDY CALENDAR.** Before a course begins, be sure to check the syllabus and commit to due dates for progress to be completed. Designate study times and places you like to study, so that you can plan out your study sessions. Establishing a routine and strictly adhering to it will help you develop good habits and learn more efficiently.

**STUDY IN INCREMENTS.** By doing a small amount of work every day, you’ll avoid the stress of lengthy cram sessions around a midterm or final and retain more of the information you’re attempting to learn. Research shows that breaking up the learning over shorter sessions is far more effective than large study sessions because of spacing. With greater spacing, each learning session occurs in a slightly different context, which gives your brain more cues to unconsciously recognize during the retrieval of information.

**USE MOBILE DEVICES TO YOUR ADVANTAGE.** In choosing online as the medium for your education, you’ve made receiving it as easy as connecting to the Internet. With so many choices in how to do that, be it via tablet, smartphone, laptop or desktop, you should check in with your classes daily. This will make school a daily activity, prevent it from becoming overwhelming and help you avoid any surprises such as a syllabus change.

**TIMING IS EVERYTHING.** Some people focus better at night, others in the morning. Perhaps you’re a parent and will be able to concentrate better at 5 a.m. when the kids are still asleep or during the afternoon when you have the house to yourself. Find a time that works for you to concentrate and use it wisely.

**FIND A BALANCE.** No matter how hard you want to fight it, you’re going to need sleep and a break from the work. In the end, your body will thank you by allowing your mind to concentrate more thoroughly, thus improving the efficiency of your study sessions and the quality of your classwork. While working hard is a good thing, you don’t actually want to make the work hard.
Education is a Family Affair

After enrolling, you’re likely to find that there are no bigger role players in your successful completion of an online degree than your family.

You can get your employer on board and select the perfect degree program from a college that checks all the boxes in regards to your goals and time availability, but if your parents, spouses, partners or children are not supportive of what you are doing, it’s going to make your journey more difficult in the end.

Finding support from the ones you love is often a key element in getting through tough times. For Betti Schlagel, her husband was a crutch of stability that allowed her to finish school after her daughter was diagnosed with epilepsy just before the beginning of her final term.

“I wanted to quit to be with her, but my husband was my rock through it all,” Schlagel said. “He supported me and took time off from work to care for her, and that allowed me to focus on school.”

Kara Carr graduated from NEC in 2016 with a bachelor’s degree in healthcare administration. Her husband works nights and also attends NEC studying criminal justice. As parents of two children, their schedule took careful planning and teamwork to make work.

“We alternate our schedules to coordinate with our classes,” Carr said. “If I know he has major homework due, I will work on all mine two nights prior to his so I can manage the kids and keep them calm while he works and vice versa. We definitely have to work together in order to make it work.”

Younger students often have concerns over whether or not they’ll have the support of their parents. It’s a good idea to communicate the value of your education to them from the get-go and the level of support you will need to be successful. Online learning may be new to a lot of parents, so be prepared to show that you are ready for the challenge and have done the necessary research to assure the legitimacy of the institution you are trying to attend.

This is particularly true for first-generation students. A study from the Journal of College Student Retention noted in 2012 that students whose parents didn’t attend college received far less emotional, financial and informational support than their counterparts with parents that completed some higher education. The lack of support often results in higher levels of anxiety and stress that can make attaining a degree far more difficult than it would be if they were on board.