How To Thrive in an Online Graduate Program

INTRODUCTION

The growth of online education over the past decade has been dramatic. Not only have Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) captured the public imagination, many universities are offering both professional development courses and certifications as well as degree-granting programs. While for-profit institutions like the University of Phoenix and Strayer University have aggressively promoted online education geared primarily to working people and non-traditional students, major, established universities are also getting into the act in an increasingly big way. The largest non-profit provider of online education, the University of Maryland University College, has more than 70,000 students in 100 different academic programs.

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The attraction of online education is easy to understand. Presumably students can study when it is convenient to them. They do not have to travel to campus, fight traffic and search for parking. The allure of being able to control your time is great. But studying in an online classroom and participating in an online environment present many challenges. This white paper outlines some of those challenges and offers strategies to overcome them.

THE TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE

By the time we reach graduate school, most of us have had 16 years of experience in a traditional classroom and generally are very comfortable with the routines. Perhaps the most striking element of the traditional classroom, and one that is so commonplace that it has faded into the background, is that the rhythm of the courses is set by the class meetings.

In undergraduate education on most campuses, the majority of the classes meet two or three times a week for 50 minutes to 1:15 minutes a session. Smaller seminars may meet for two and half hours once a week. Some executive programs may have full-day meetings on the weekend. Each class session is a milestone. Students prepare for a session and inside the classroom, the professor enhances, adds to and punctuates what has been learned in preparation. When each specific class period ends, students and the teacher move on to the next set of assignments. The mid-term, final and longer-term assignments represent additional, more significant milestones.

Given the familiarity of the classroom structure and experience, most people have developed the routines that have helped them succeed at the level to which they are accustomed. Some students do all the assigned reading prior to each class; others only skim the reading first and wait for the professor to provide insight into what is really important in the classroom itself (and sadly some undergraduates don't do the reading at all). Inside the classroom, some students actively participate,

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regularly raising their hands to answer questions and engage in classroom discussions if there are discussions at all. Other people may participate from time to time, and still others simply do not feel comfortable volunteering in ad hoc and fluid environments like the classroom. Although they are paying attention to the classroom interaction, they opt not to actively participate themselves. And once again, unfortunately, many undergraduates don't pay attention to the classroom or lecture hall and consequently are not in a position to participate.

ONLINE EXPERIENCE

Asynchronous online education, in which students do not have to gather either online or in person at any specific moment but rather participate when it is convenient to them, represents an entirely new kind of educational experience. Without the structure of regular classroom meetings to serve

as milestones, the routines developed over more than a decade and a half of classroom experience no longer apply. Online requires students to prepare and participate differently. Moreover, students must learn to use what may be entirely new technology to engage in the course. Perhaps most importantly, students must create for themselves a structure that will allow them to move through the class appropriately without being overwhelmed. Undoubtedly, the professor will establish some sort of schedule for the reading and the assignments. But students still need to create their own schedules and paces that will allow them to work systematically while acknowledging the other demands on their time. In a well designed online educational experience, the instructor will establish periodic milestones throughout the semester. But it is up to the students to manage their work to meet those milestones.

THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

In general, an online course will be conducted through a learning management system (LMS) such as Blackboard or Moodle. Many colleges and universities have created their own learning management systems or have modified a commercial system and given it a unique name. Most of the basic course tasks will be conducted via the LMS. A standard LMS supports email, allows faculty to post content such as documents, articles in PDF formats, links to Web sites and so on, and provides some collaboration tools, such as discussion boards. Many universities also integrate blogs, Wikis and other advanced functionality. Finally, LMS's offer a range of options for submission of assignments. Two of the most common are drop boxes, in which students upload a file that only the teacher can access for grading or other

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reasons, and Turnitin. Like a regular drop box, students upload their files to Turnitin. Turnitin then checks the document for plagiarism prior to making it available to the instructor for grading. Many high school students are now familiar with using Turnitin.

While an LMS generally provides the basic infrastructure of an online course, sometimes a teacher will want to use specialized or customized material or material created specifically for that class. For example, a professor may create a video lecture with PowerPoint slides. Depending on the technology used to create the video, the student may have to download and access a separate viewer. From time to time, a professor may require students to go outside the LMS to access collaboration tools or other applications needed to perform a task. So while the LMS offers the primary platform for an online classroom, it may not be the only one.

GETTING FAMILIAR WITH THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

Most online programs offer some sort of orientation, but not all online courses do. It is very important for the student to learn to navigate the features of the LMS before actually needing to use them in the class. In other words, a student should learn to upload a document to a drop box or submit it through Turnitin before an assignment is actually due. Students should learn how to post and respond to a discussion board prior to their first discussion. They should be able to send email, and so on.

The professor or a program director must insure the opportunity to use all the tools required in a course prior to the specific moment in the course in which they are needed. Along the same lines, students should be sure that they have downloaded all the necessary content viewers for the class, that those content viewers work correctly, and that any additional technical functionality needed for the course is available and operates as expected. You should test the technology early in the semester to give yourself ample time to work through any problems.

THINGS WILL GO WRONG

Despite advance preparation, however, during the course of a semester, in more cases than not, one of the technological tools will not work as expected. You must familiarize yourself with the processes and procedures of responding to technical failures. In most cases, online students should have access to a technology help desk to the same degree that on-campus students do. You should familiarize yourself with how to access the help desk via telephone or email; learn their hours of operation and their anticipated response time. You do not have to -- and often can't -- fix all the problems with the technology you may encounter by yourself. The problem

could be with the LMS, the network or elsewhere. The help desk should be able to identify the source of the problem and propose solutions. If the university's help desk hours do not offer sufficient coverage, find out where and who to turn to for help when problems occur.

In addition to contacting the help desk or a designated point person at the university offering the course, you should contact your professors and alert them to the problem. The professor should have a policy covering late assignments if the delay results from a failure of technology. You should know this policy in advance. However, if a professor is going to lower the grade if a paper is late, for example, even if the LMS failed in some way, you must plan to turn your papers in a bit early to allow yourself breathing room should something go wrong.

GET TO KNOW YOUR PROFESSOR

Building a close tie with your professor is one of the most challenging aspects of online education. Typically, you may not even know what a professor looks like or the sound of his or her voice. Or if you do, it will perhaps be through a video the professor recorded. In a classroom, even if you do not interact much with the professor, you can get a sense of the person, and the connection a student makes with the teacher is a significant component of the learning experience. A teacher's enthusiasm for the subject is an essential element in a successful educational relationship. Online it can be hard to assess that enthusiasm.

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In an online environment, therefore, you must make an effort to interact directly with the professor. If the teacher has set up office hours for video conferencing or other types of direct communication, you should take advantage of them even

if you don't have a specific problem to resolve. Most faculty members enjoy discussing their subject material with their students outside the normal classroom structure. Since the normal classroom structure does not exist, the online environment is the perfect opportunity to interact informally with the teacher.

In some classes, online education also provides the opportunity for students to easily pass on material to the professor. When you see something appropriate online, it is easy to copy the URL and send it along. Depending on the class, it may be posted to the LMS or be circulated to the other students in the class.

GET TO KNOW YOUR CLASSMATES

Surprisingly, students in online classes often have more opportunities to get to know their classmates than students in traditional classrooms. Most online classes support discussion boards for student interaction, and many use other kinds of interactive platforms as well. Unfortunately, many students do not view posting to a discussion board as truly interacting with their classmates; instead, they see it as communicating only with the teacher. If you take the time to thoughtfully comment and respond to the posts of your classmates, however, you can start to build a real relationship with them.

Along the same lines, some online classes may also have a number of synchronous sessions when everybody participates in an online chat or a video conference. Although sometimes it is difficult to attend—people sign up for online classes so they are not tied down to a specific time or place—making the effort to participate in those sessions can be very rewarding. First, they are usually fun. Second, they can help build student-to-student ties. Building a cohort and creating a sense of identity with your colleagues in the class significantly enrich the online educational experience.

UNDERSTAND EXPECTATIONS

The online environment does not provide the same kind of informal and spontaneous feedback mechanisms found in regular classrooms. In a traditional classroom, many people can sense if they are participating too much or not enough and adjust accordingly. If they are unclear about a homework assignment, they can chat with the teacher at the end of class. The online classroom lacks all the informal cues for behavior apparent in other settings.

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That means you have to ask in order to know what is expected. How long should a discussion post be? How many times must you post? How strict are the deadlines? To whom can you turn for support or assistance? The professor should provide clear guidelines. If the guidelines are not clear, you should make the effort to clarify them. In that way, you can meet your own expectations, the expectations of the professor and those of your classmates.

GET CONNECTED TO YOUR UNIVERSITY

In most cases, when you take an online class or participate in an online program, you receive the same privileges as traditional students. You can apply for financial aid. You can check books out of the library. You can avail yourself of academic support and other support services such as the career development center and the counseling center. You can interact as a student with every part of the university. And you should take advantage of that.

Universities use many approaches to help strengthen the ties between the students and the institution. There are on-campus events and sporting events. Depending on their precise location, online students

often cannot join in those events. But there are things you can do. You can follow the university on Facebook,

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Twitter, Instagram and so on. If the school or the program has a LinkedIn site, you should join it. And if it fits your fashion sense, you may want to consider buying some branded merchandise. Be proud of the school you attend. Finally, if you are not too far away, visit the campus every now and again. Make an appointment to meet with one or more of your professors or program advisers. Joining the university's community and building real connections will deepen and provide more texture to your overall experience.

CONCLUSION

Online education offers many advantages to students, particularly those in graduate school. It offers flexibility and in many ways puts the student in control of the educational experience. But the experience is new and many of the strategies that made you a successful student in the past, including the implicit knowledge you have making your way around a traditional classroom, no longer apply.

Online education puts you in control of the experience, but you must take control. Not only do you have to create your own experience, you must develop strategies to ensure the technology and infrastructure work for you. You must proactively build your relationship with your instructors and your colleagues. You may also want to take advantage of the opportunities offered to students at a specific institution, such as the career center, academic support services, library privileges and student discounts. If you do take control, your online educational experience will be memorable, rewarding and fulfilling.

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