

INSPIRING POSSIBILITIES

Online College Programs: Questions to Consider for Students with Disabilities

Technology has expanded the options for people wishing to take college courses. Taking online courses may provide unique opportunities for students with disabilities. Students and parents need to be careful to research and understand this postsecondary option. A good rule is that an online course or program should require the same amount of coursework as taking classes on campus.

What is an “online program”?

The term “online program” refers to a public or private institution offering classes for associate, bachelors or master’s degrees online. Examples may include national “for-profit” schools, and two- or four-year schools that offer the option of taking all or most classes online. Often parents and students are attracted to online educational programs because they believe they will be more efficient, less expensive, and more flexible for their student with a disability.

There are many costs associated with taking postsecondary classes on a college campus that go beyond the standard tuition. Some of these costs, i.e., transportation costs, child care, meals, and living expenses can be bypassed to a certain extent by taking classes online. There also may be added convenience when taking a class online due to the ability to work when your schedule allows.

Differences between Traditional and Online Postsecondary Programs

Most **traditional postsecondary programs** have some combination of lecture, face-to-face and small-group interactions. An **online program** may offer all of the required course content online. In an online environment, students are graded based on their writing, projects, postings, responses, and online interactions. As an example the number of comments a student posts in response to questions asked online is typically recorded, evaluated, and may be figured into the final grade. Students often work independently when their schedule permits and there is little interaction with the instructor or professor.

Online programs may have the same learning objectives as traditional programs but approach them quite differently. For example, in an **online program**, students may meet with the professor and classmates virtually. There may be more emphasis on writing skills because there are few face-to-face interactions. Class discussions are usually held online, and student comments, projects, or notes are posted through specific web-based tools. A **traditional program** most likely has face-to-face meetings, classroom interactions and discussions. Students are expected to attend lectures, presentations and lab sessions, if appropriate. In recent years, traditional programs have increasingly included some opportunities for students such as conducting activities, specific projects, and receive feedback online.

Points to Consider

Online education is popular, but there are considerations to keep in mind when choosing this postsecondary educational option. Some of the positive elements of an online program may include affordability, convenience, and flexibility.

Parents may want to think about the following:

- Consider whether the online program has a point person for students with disabilities who is accessible to the student
- Determine if there are readily available accommodations for students with disabilities
- Investigate the accessibility of web-based tools used by the school and the cost, if any. Keep in mind that required software or computer operating system requirements are not considered accommodations in higher education
- Understand that some online schools are “for profit” enterprises that have different entrance and payment criteria than traditional universities and colleges. Parents are urged to be aware of programs that promise full degrees in short amounts of time
- Ask about the eligibility process for accessing accommodations, which may be more difficult to navigate when taking classes online
- Don’t commit to paying tuition or sign a contract for an online class before you determine that necessary accommodations are available
- Find out if there is flexibility in the structure of an online program. For example, are there any alternative ways of presenting what you have learned, such as video presentations, live streaming, or others?
- Research how employers in your youth’s field of study feel about online degrees; for example, some career fields, such as technology or social media, may embrace online learning, while more traditional fields, such as healthcare positions, may look more favorably on degrees granted in campus settings
- Verify the program completion and job-placement rates for graduates for the online program you are considering

Accreditation

As with any postsecondary educational program, be sure to research the validity of accreditation of the online postsecondary program that you are interested in taking.

Accreditation means that a postsecondary educational institution has been reviewed by an authorized authority to ensure that there is record of the institution, and that the course content is acceptable to employers, professional associations, and other colleges. Some online “universities” may say they are accredited, but in fact, they are not. Earning a degree from a program that is not accredited may result in great expense and wasted time for a degree that is not recognized by employers. Parents and students can check with the [Council for Higher Education Accreditation](#) or the [U.S. Department of Education](#).

Summary

There has been a significant increase in the number of online postsecondary programs. **U.S. News and World Report** provides information and rankings each year. “Online learning is becoming an integral part of higher education, and consumers are hungry for information related to legitimate online degrees,” said Anita Narayan, managing editor of Education at U.S. News. “[The Best Online Programs](#) rankings can help prospective students begin their search for a program that suits both their academic and career goals, as well as their work and family schedules¹.”

Just as with traditional programs, parents and students with disabilities need to go beyond the rankings to determine if the program is a “good fit” and that needed accommodations will be in place. Careful consideration of the questions and considerations raised here will help families to make good decisions.

Resources

www.onlineuniversities.com

www.usnews.com/education/online-education

www.usnews.com/education/online-education/articles/2014/04/04/tips-for-online-students-with-disabilities

www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/teaching-students-with-learning-disabilities-in-the-online-classroom

www.accreditedschoolsonline.org/resources/best-accredited-colleges-schools-for-students-with-disabilities

¹Some material is adapted with permission from *Taking the Next Step: Planning for Success in Postsecondary Education*, a curriculum prepared for the IOWA State Department of Education.