

Are Your Students Prepared for Distance Learning?

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Summary

Higher education has experienced increased enrollment in online courses in recent years. However, the online learning environment is not ideal for every student. When students are able to self-assess their readiness for online learning, they can make informed decisions about whether to pursue their studies online or in a traditional on-campus setting.

Problem: Student retention is a growing concern

Many of today's higher education students are attracted to online courses due to flexible scheduling and the ability to participate in courses from home or on the go. As a result, enrollments in online programs have greatly increased in recent years ([Allen & Seaman, 2013](#)).

However, student attrition from online programs is an issue of concern ([Hart, 2012](#)). Deficiencies in several areas ([Willging & Johnson, 2004](#); [Knowles & Kerkman, 2007](#); [Hart, 2012](#)) may contribute to the attrition of online learners, including:

- Intrinsic motivation and persistence
- Engagement with classmates and/or the instructor
- Study skills and ability to process written material
- Time management skills
- Access to or familiarity with technology

In a traditional, face-to-face course, such obstacles may be easier to overcome than in an online environment. The need to regularly attend an on-campus class at a set time, or else lose the opportunity to obtain needed information and feedback, provides motivation and requires

that time be set aside for involvement with the material. Personal, face-to-face interaction with classmates and the instructor prevents feelings of isolation and promotes engagement. Weak study and reading skills may be offset by listening to a face-to-face lecture, studying with classmates, or dropping by an instructor's office hours for assistance. Repeated reminders of assignments and due dates can help with time management. To the extent that technology is used in a face-to-face course, the instructor is generally present to assist should any difficulties arise.

Solution: Student self-assessment tools

It is beneficial to ask students to self-assess before beginning any online course in order to determine their readiness for this unique learning environment. Are they truly prepared for online learning? If not, are there steps they can take to prepare themselves? Simply participating in a self-assessment of readiness for online learning may increase student awareness of the unique challenges and benefits they will experience.

Student self-assessment instruments generally focus on attitudes and beliefs regarding online learning, favored learning style, study habits, accessibility of learning tools and resources, and technology experience. If your institution does not already offer such a self-assessment, it may be instructive to examine the University System of Georgia's SORT (Student Online Readiness Tool) ([Schrum, 2003](#)), in which students take six separate self-assessment quizzes:

1. Technology experience—confidence in using, maintaining, and troubleshooting a personal computer, navigating the Internet, and working with document files

2. Access to tools—access to a personal computer with sound capabilities, basic software, and a stable Internet connection
3. Study habits—self-direction and time management
4. My lifestyle—adequate time and suitable environment for study
5. Goals and purposes—motivation for taking the online course and staying on task
6. Learning preference—organizational skills, problem-solving abilities, and aptitude for working independently

The SORT instrument offers feedback and links to related resources based on the student's individual responses. A useful collection of additional surveys may be found online through MERLOT ([Hanley, 2013](#)). Your institution may choose to develop and validate its own assessment, a process described in detail by Dray et al. ([2011](#)).

Encourage honest responses

Whichever self-assessment tool you choose, it is important to stress to students that they answer the questions as accurately and truthfully as possible. You may wish to ensure that students' answers to the survey questions are confidential in order to encourage honest responses. Ideally, the self-assessment will occur before a student enrolls for an online course, but it may also be offered prior to the end of the drop/add period so that students may make an informed decision about whether or not they should continue.

Conclusions

Students who are aware of the unique challenges of the online learning environment and how compatible these are with their own strengths and weakness are better able to make informed decisions about whether online courses are right for them. Self-assessment tools, if used appropriately, can be useful in helping students evaluate their readiness for learning online.

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