
Getting an Edge in Online Education: Developing an Online Learning Web Portal

Beate P. Winterstein
Educational Research Methodology Department, School of Education
PO Box 21670, Curry 210
University of North Carolina at Greensboro
Greensboro , NC 27402-6170
bpwinter@uncg.edu

Abstract

To effectively compete in the market of online education, institutions need to get potential students' attention and interest in their high quality online programs. This goal can be reached by developing an online Web portal presenting the institution's online learning environment and the specific class, certificate, or degree program offerings in a way that answers self-directed students' questions. For online institutions, this paper offers a list of questions, organized in different categories (e.g., is online learning for me, technical requirements, online learning environment), that potential students might ask to determine whether online education at a certain institution fits their needs. This tool can be used as a guide to develop an online learning Web portal.

Getting an Edge in Online Education

Developing an Online Learning Web Portal

Students in the 21 st century demand life-long learning on a mouse-click (Kahn, 2000). Adult students who have family or job responsibilities increasingly enroll in online programs (Oakley, 2004) . This enables them to get additional qualification from a university without having to move to a new location, and it helps them fit the educational work into their busy lives . The educational market certainly has recognized—and dominantly accepted—the widespread trend towards gaining additional qualifications through online education (Wojciechowski, 2005). At this point, educational research focuses partly on comparing distance education to traditional education (for example, see the meta-analysis by Bernard et al., 2004), looking at students' satisfaction with distance education (e.g., Allen, Bourhis, Burrell, & Mabry, 2002), and exploring elements that improve the quality of online classes, for example by preparing instructors for their new role (Yang & Cornelious, 2005) and by making the online learning environment more interactive (Northrup, 2002).

But, to stand out in the online education market and to attract students, educational institutions benefit from giving a good first impression of their online environment and programs (Carnevale, 2005). This first contact between potential students and the online institution usually is moderated by the interface, namely the Website with information on the educational institution including specifics about the online programs and the online learning environment.

The attention and interest of students searching for online programs are best addressed by a well-developed and user-friendly Website that easily answers student's questions concerning the online learning environment and the specific online program. This is important in three ways.

First, online institutions appear professional and promise quality online education by developing an online information portal that includes specifics about the online learning environment and the different online programs. This online information interface makes a lot of sense because students want to study online. Furthermore, institutions already start the online relationship by providing students with all the answers they potentially could ask about the online environment and online program in an online format. This doesn't mean that there shouldn't be the option for students to directly contact an advisor or request print materials about the online program. The option to talk to an enrollment advisor—in an online chat, email, or phone—and to receive a print brochure about the online program should always be easily accessible as well (Carnevale, 2005). This is especially important for students who are rather unfamiliar with online learning and using online resources in general.

Second, adult students are often very self-directed. According to Knowles (1984), self-directed learning includes that “the individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning demands, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes” (p. 18). For picking an online program, that means that potential students want to access information on how they can organize their online learning with their other responsibilities (family or work), how they can communicate with peers and instructors online, how they will be tested online, and how an online program will provide additional knowledge or skills that can be transferred to the “real world” in order to make an informed decision about what online program of what institution to choose.

Third, the advantage of accessing answers to questions online is that there's no need for students to make the extra step of requesting written information that will take some time to reach their homes. While waiting for the printed material, they already could have found another online program and institution that displayed their descriptions completely online.

For all the above reasons, the questionnaire below orients online institutions towards creating an informational Web portal for their online education according to questions that students might ask themselves in the important phase of choosing an online program. The following questionnaire functions as a guide for professionals responsible for promoting online programs, including details of the online learning environment. The different categories (e.g., is online learning for me, technical requirements, online learning environment) with their extensive collection of questions represent a pool from which professionals can choose according to the specifics of their online learning environment and online programs. The guide results from research done over the past years, including evaluations of online universities (Winterstein, 2000), observational research of online program Web sites, focus groups, and surveys of university students.

Guide for Developing an Online Learning Web Portal

A. Deciding if online learning is for me (UNCG iCampus, 2005)

Online advantages: What kind of advantages, such as flexible learning times and locations, does your institution offer in online learning?

Typical online activities: What activities, such as taking online quizzes and contributing to the discussion forum, do I typically perform during a week “in class?”

Sample class: What elements, such as online discussion boards and online subject video clips,

does an online class include? Can I browse through a sample online class?

Self-assessment: What questionnaire can I take to assess if online learning is for me?

Efficiency of online education: How can I evaluate the quality of online education in comparison to traditional face-to-face learning? How can I evaluate the quality of your institution's online offerings in comparison to others?

B. Technical requirements (UNCG iCampus, 2005)

- Overview of technical requirements: What technical requirements—hardware and software equipment—do I need to participate in your online programs at your institution?
- Overview of technical skills: What technical skills, such as word processing, emailing, and downloading software, do I need to successfully study online?
- Overview of guidelines and tips on technical issues: What options do you offer for updating technical requirements (e.g., list of software tools with links to the downloading sites, and technical skills, such a short tutorial on using the learning platform)?
- Hardware installation: What steps do I need to follow to update my hardware, if necessary?
- Software downloads: What guidelines do I need to follow to download software, such as Quick Time or Acrobat Reader, if necessary?
- Course management platform: How do I learn the functions, such as how to take tests online and how to use the discussion board, of the online learning platform, for example Blackboard or WebCT?
- Word processing skills: How can I improve my word processing skills?
- Web search: What tips do I need to follow to successfully search for information on the Web?
- Email skills: How can I update my emailing skills?
- Technical Course Preparation: What kind of online preparation material in the form of a small online workshop or tutorial do you offer to inexperienced students for online programs, such as how to download software and how to navigate the course management platform?
- Test on technical skills: What kind of test(s) (for example, on the course management platform Blackboard or WebCT) do I need to pass on technical skills to enter your online degree program?

C. Quality of the educational provider and the online program

- Accreditation: What accreditation does the institution or online program hold?
- Awards: What awards, for example Sloan-C's "[Most Outstanding Effective Practices Awards](#)" does the online class, certificate, or degree program hold?
- Faculty certification: What experience, background, and training in online education do online faculty have?
- Degree completion rate: What percent of the students complete the online degree program (with success) at your institution?
- Drop out rate: How many students drop out of the online programs at your institution?
- Student Satisfaction: According to surveys, how many students were satisfied, very satisfied, or extremely satisfied with the online programs at your institution?
- Student testimonials: What do online students say about their experience in the online programs at your institution?
- Knowledge and skill transfer: What does the university do to guarantee the transfer of knowledge acquired in online programs in the “real world”?
- Quality management: What other information does the educational institution provide that speaks for high quality online education?

D. Online faculty

- Subject experience: How qualified are faculty members typically in their field—what academic degrees do they hold?
- Training: What types of training do faculty go through to be prepared for teaching online?
- Teaching approach: Are online faculty trained to take the role of an online facilitator (instead of a “sage on the stage”)?
- Teaching methods: How do faculty keep up-to-date on new developments in online education, such as going to conferences on online education or reading journals on the topic?
- Awards: What awards, for example Sloan-C's “[Excellence in Teaching and Learning Awards](#),” did faculty receive for online teaching?
- Ratio of part-time to full-time faculty: What is the ratio between faculty members teaching online as part-time and full-time faculty members?
- Other jobs: What other jobs related to their teaching subjects do your faculty hold besides teaching online?

E. Online Students

- Typical characteristics of online learners (such as good self-discipline and time management, great motivation, independence): What characteristics do online students need to be successful in online learning?
- Age of online students: How old are online students on average? What is the typical age range?
- Previous online experience: How many online students had experience with the online learning environment before entering the online degree program?
- Ratio of part-time vs. full time students: How many students typically enroll full time, and how many enroll as part time students?
- Academic degree: How many online students study for an online undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral degree? At what level of academic degree do students typically enter online degree programs?
- Drop out: How many students drop out of online degree programs because of barriers within online education?

F. Online Services

- Online technical support: What technical support does your institution provide? Is it available 24/7? How can I access it (email, phone, chat, etc.)?
- Online advising services: When and how is advising available to potential and current online students?
- Online financial services: What services do you offer to students who will need financial aid?
- Online writing services: What services does the educational institution offer for writing essays, papers, theses, and dissertations online?
- Online career services: When and how can I access online career services?
- Online disability services: What services do you offer to students with disabilities?

G. Online Educational Institution

- Foundation of online institution: When did your educational institution first introduce the online environment?
- Administrative offices: Where are the administrative offices of the university?
- Institution's goals: What are the university's goals in general and for online education in particular?

H. Online Learning Environment

- Learning platform: On which technology is the online learning system based, e.g., Blackboard or WebCT?
- Online elements: What kind of tools does the online learning system provide (online library, email, bulletin boards, print material, etc.)? When do I typically use which tool, for example the asynchronous discussion board for topic discussions with other learners?
- Students' self-directedness: How self-directed can students be in the online learning environment concerning flexibility in time, location, learning methods, tools, and contents?
- Learning self-assessment: How does the online learning environment allow me to self-assess my progress (for example an e-portfolio could fulfill this function)?
- Distance: How does the online learning environment reduce the distance between students and instructors, for example by including discussion boards?
- Self-organization: What tips do you provide to help students set learning goals and priorities at a distance, to motivate them at a distance, and to manage their time in online classes in general?
- Communication: How can students and instructors communicate with each other (e.g., email, live chat, asynchronous discussion boards, etc.)?
- Interaction: Which activities, for example asynchronous discussion boards or synchronous chat, typically support the interaction between learners and instructors?
- Individual Assignments: What types of assignments, such as papers, contributions to discussion boards, or online PowerPoint presentations, do students typically have?
- Group tasks: What group tasks does the educational institution typically incorporate, such as peer review of papers, writing assignments in groups, or discussion in the discussion board?
- Local support centers: Does the university offer local support centers?

I. Degree information

- General description: What is the program about?
- Program goals: What are the goals of the program? What will I know at the end of the program?
- Program structure: What is the structure of the program including the theoretical part, practical part, volunteering, organization of the week, etc.?
- Credits: How many credits do I need?
- Courses: Which courses do I need to attend?
- Course sequence: Are some courses prerequisites for other courses?
- Exams: What kind of exams do I have to take?
- Program duration: How many years do I need to finish the program?
- Weekly effort: How many hours per week on average do I need for studies in this program?
- Prerequisites: Do I need to fulfill any special prerequisites, such as age or previous degrees, to enter programs?
- Application deadlines: When are the deadlines for applications?
- Application format: Where do I get the application form and where do I have to send it? Is it possible to do the application process online?
- Application materials: What do I need to send along with my application: curriculum vitae, personal statement, photocopy of an ID, etc.?
- Selection process: How are students selected for the program (biographical events, undergraduate degree, etc.)?
- Cost: How much does the program cost? What services, such as sending educational material and online library services, are included in the price? What additional fees are there?
- Program start: At what times does the university offer entry in the program (only once a year, every month, etc.)?

- Part-time or full-time student: What type of participation is recommended or required: Will I enroll as a full-time or part-time student?
- Jobs: What jobs do students typically get after finishing the online degree? In what sectors, such as corporate and government?
- Higher Salaries: How many students report receiving higher salaries or finding a higher paid position after finishing the online program?

Discussion

In a time of increasing demand for online education, this paper supports administrative professionals in creating a Web portal containing information about the online learning environment and about online programs. Professionals in online education can use the guide presented in this paper. The guide categorizes questions potential online students might ask concerning technical requirements, the quality of online programs, and the details of the online learning environment.

There is a need for answering potential online students' questions concerning the online learning environment and online programs. The need is based on the increase of online students (The Sloan Consortium, 2004) and the competition between online institutions (Hanna, 1998). Furthermore, educational institutions benefit from giving a first good impression of their online learning environments and online programs by displaying relevant information in a user-friendly online format (Web portal on online education and programs), by addressing self-directed learners with information they need to make an informed decision about the online program in which to enroll, and by skipping a time-consuming step of making students request information about the online offerings.

A well-organized, extensive Web portal on online education would inform the potential students the institution wants to attract in a very effective way. Nevertheless, it's important for professionals in online education who are responsible for promoting their online offerings to be aware of certain challenges with developing an informative, user-friendly Web portal.

Challenges for Developing a Web Portal

There are various challenges that need to be considered. First, the educational institution needs to pick the questions it needs to answer according to its individual online learning environment and programs. Second, it needs to organize them in a user-friendly way according to Web design principles. Third, the Web portal needs to be consistently updated according to new development and changes in general and concerning the single institution in particular. All of the previous steps certainly require various resources: professionals, such as online learning specialists, Web designers, editors, administrators, time, and money.

Besides the previous mentioned aspects, it's particularly important to display information in a way that doesn't overwhelm interested students, especially adults who might not be that familiar with the online world in general and online learning in particular. Educational institutions should make available additional information resources, such as print material that can be sent out or advisors who can be contacted (either online, by email, or by phone)—traditional contact and resource information are still beneficial as back-ups for these circumstances. Also, it's helpful for rather inexperienced online students to find out what technical help they can get when applying online and, of course, while studying online.

Suggestions on How to Develop a Web Portal

If an educational institution already promotes its online degree programs on the general portal of the institution, but doesn't give information on the online learning environment, it is easiest to start out by collecting information according to categories (e.g., is online learning for me, technical requirements, online learning environment). Questions and answers, organized in categories, could be displayed under one button similar to a FAQ section. If the educational institution has more resources, it's certainly advisable to create a Web portal that solely consists of information relevant to online education.

Future Research

To develop and improve Web portals on online education and online programs, researchers could perform various usability tests on them (Brown, 2002). For example, educational institutions might want to track the hits of various single pages of the Web portal. The number and distribution of hits could indicate the importance of single topics on online education that potential students need for making an informed decision for their online degree advancement. This quantitative research could help improve the information display to support self-directed learners in their decision making phase, for example, if online education is for them and if they can organize their life around an online program.

Usability tests also would provide information on how to organize Web sites with information on online education and online programs so that students don't feel overwhelmed by the relevant information. Another way of scientifically researching this information could be realized by creating a questionnaire—for example, based on the guide presented in this paper—to get quantitative data on informative material that is of high priority for students in the decision phase regarding going to school in an online program.

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Author Note

Beate P. Winterstein, Educational Research Methodology Department, University of North Carolina at Greensboro .

I would like to thank Paul J. Silvia and the Writing Center at UNCG for their comments on this paper.

Correspondence should be addressed to Beate P. Winterstein, Educational Research Methodology Department, School of Education , PO Box 21670 , Curry 210, University of North Carolina at Greensboro , Greensboro , NC 27402-6170 . Electronic mail may be sent to bpwinter@uncg.edu .

Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, Volume VIII, Number III, Fall 2005
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