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Online Higher Education in 2017 and Beyond

Daphne Stanford · Wednesday, February 22nd, 2017

Remember when your only options for college classes online were University of Phoenix or ITT Tech? Well, things have changed since those days—perhaps more dramatically than you realize. But what specifically has changed, and what are some lingering pain points? Moreover, what does the future of online education look like at this point in time?

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The future of online higher education holds a great deal of potential, and this is in part because of the recognition that college is no longer a one-size-fits-all experience designed solely for privileged prep school graduates. More and more, college students are first-generation, stay-at-home-moms, adult caretakers, or professional adults with full time jobs who are limited in the amount of time they're able to spend attending classes. Because of this reality, many college students never graduate at all—more than half, in fact, according to Arizona State University President Michael Crow. This is part of the reason why alternative models such as ASU's online, accredited version of college are becoming so common: because of modern student—and market—demand.

There are a number of benefits to the online education model that shouldn't be overlooked: more accessible hours and learning at one's own pace, new technologies like gamification, interactive videos, and recorded lectures are helping ensure that the subject matter is as engaging as possible. As we look into the future, virtual and augmented reality will be utilized more and more frequently. Students who are less extroverted may also find participation to feel less intimidating and more accessible, due to its more indirect nature, online.

Prospective students shouldn't go into online education expecting an easy-going educational experience, however; quite the opposite! In fact, online courses require a great deal of personal discipline, since the only person in the room is the student. If students are highly motivated, however, as well as self-driven, they are likely to do well. There is also a potential for less immediate, one-on-one attention from professors, due to the online nature of courses. Although professors are reachable via email and chat rooms, the immediacy of the interaction could vary.

Because of this, it could be helpful for students in the same geographical area to form study groups, if at all possible—even if they're conducted via virtual chat rooms—in order to have the opportunity to discuss the class reading and lecture material in a smaller group format. Alternately, it may be easier for some students to simply partner up with one other student in the class to help

facilitate discussions via chat room or phone.

Regardless of the nature of the program—graduate or undergraduate level—students should formulate a time management plan. It helps to visualize this sort of thing through the use of a study calendar or planner which can be used to add due dates and designated study times for each class. No matter how much technology is being implemented in one's online classroom experience, old-fashioned pen and paper can be a life saver when it comes to planning and visualization. That being said, technology should also be utilized for things like due date reminders and reading texts online. In addition, a USB-based headset is enormously helpful for live video chats, lectures, and discussions.

It remains to be seen how much technology like augmented reality and artificial intelligence (AI) become implemented in the online classroom, but so far there has been a lot of success with chatbots and virtual learning assistants that provide one-on-one tutoring: "Using natural language processing, machine learning and cognitive computing technologies, Cognii allows for open-response questioning, instant feedback and conversation until the student masters the concept. It then provides instant scoring at human-level performance." Moreover, The Washington Post argues, "There is evidence…that online education is increasing access to higher education, at least among master's degrees."

What types of online programs would you be most inclined to try? Have you graduated from an online program at the undergraduate or graduate level? What forms of technology do you think are most likely to take off, over the next few years? Share your thoughts in the comments section, below.

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