

Optimizing Online Education

Tips to help you make the most of your online courses *By Julie McAfooes, MS, RN-BC, CNE, ANEF*

IF YOU ARE LOOKING TO BOOST

your career with another degree or certification, chances are you are considering online courses. But distance learning isn't always easy; unfamiliar technology, unconventional assignments, and an emphasis on self-motivation might trip up students new to the virtual classroom. Here are some tips to help you prepare for what's ahead and make the most of your online courses.



- **Reading:** Most online learning involves reading textbooks, journal articles, course content, and other resources found on the internet. Strategies include: printing material so it is more portable; scanning the assignment concentrating on titles, introductions and summaries to get the gist of what is included; examining images to create a visual representation of the information; applying it to your situation; sharing with others; and taking notes.
- **Writing:** Many online courses include written assignments, such as scholarly papers, journals, or discussions. Strategies include: creating talking points before you begin; using dictionaries and thesauruses to find just the right words; waiting to review your work before submission to critique it with a fresh perspective; and avoiding plagiarism by learning how to cite material properly.
- **Testing:** You may be asked to take exams online. Strategies include: testing your technology ahead of time; organizing the allowed resources before you begins; being aware of time constraints; and choosing a time and place when you are physically, mentally and emotionally ready.
- **Chatting:** Online learners may talk to their classmates and teachers in real-time (synchronously). Strategies include: downloading special software ahead of time; knowing the rules such as how to raise your hand to ask a question; reducing background noise if you are using audio; checking your appear-

ance and background if you are broadcasting video; reviewing the agenda beforehand; and taking notes or securing a transcript of the chat for later review.

- **Discussion boards:** You may be communicating with your classmates and instructors through posts to discussion boards. Strategies include: keeping on topic by knowing the theme; avoiding reiterating what someone has already expressed; avoiding sharing too much personal information; and backing up your opinions with references.
- **Field work:** Although your courses may be taught online, you may be required to engage in field work. Strategies include: securing locations that have a good fit with your interests and the aims of the course; finding qualified and eager mentors; reporting problems early; and asking for references for prospective employers.
- **Lectures:** Your teacher may deliver lectures online in real-time, but these are usually recorded for convenient viewing. Strategies include: pacing yourself by stopping recordings and reflecting on what you have just heard; postponing household chores until after the lecture; and following up by posting comments to discussion boards or completing a worksheet.
- **Group work:** Group work presents special challenges to online learners. Strategies

include: deciding when, where and how you will interact; agreeing on ways to share and integrate your individual work; knowing your role; stepping up to be the leader to gain experience; setting milestones; and focusing on the big picture.

SUCCESS PLANNING

To help you stay on track with your online learning, create a success plan that encompasses the following elements:

- **Goal statement:** Write down your personal, career and educational goals, and reasons for choosing online learning so that you are clear about why you are going to school.
- **Challenges:** Consider what could help or hurt you during your online journey. Potential barriers may include personal health, family demands, finances, academic preparation and inadequate technology. Come up with ways to overcome these challenges.
- **Needs:** Review your needs for things like order, social interaction, positive feedback, etc. Brainstorm about ways to fulfill these needs so that you are satisfied.
- **Motivators:** You can become derailed if you fail to be motivated by online learning, and you are driven toward other interests. Explore your sources of motivation and develop ways to stay committed to remaining in school.

Read through your success plan often, and celebrate your successful completion of milestones that you achieve along the way!

Julie McAfooes is the web development manager at Chamberlain College of Nursing.