# Attributes of Successful Online Students and Instructors

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## INTRODUCTION

As technological advances become mainstream in higher education, web-based learning continues to gain focus and momentum. The number of online courses in K-12, technical, professional and liberal arts education has increased significantly (Allen & Seman, 2013; Picciano, 2001; Setzer & Lewis, 2005). Multimedia technology has changed the landscape of distance education (Zirkle, Norris, Winegardner & Frustaci, 2006). Gray (2013) purports barriers to online learning are being addressed and students have access to more educational opportunities than ever before.

Online learning programs often tout more interactive, individualized and independent learning (Chen, Czerwinski & Macredie, 2000; Inan, Yukselturk & Grant, 2009; Park & Lee, 2003). However, a major challenge with web-based learning is identifying the idiosyncrasies between learning online and the traditional learning format (Inan, et. al., 2009; Martinez, 2003; Rovai, 2003). Another challenge is identifying the very different profile of online students (Dutton, Dutton & Perry, 2002; Sikora & Carroll, 2003).

Identifying the positive attributes of students and instructors in the online environment will contribute to the understanding of how we can enhance the learning experience for the student and the teaching experience for the instructor. This article will assist students and instructors in understanding the differences that may be experienced in the online environment versus the face-to-face environment and provide the opportunity to consider whether online learning and/or teaching is a "good fit" for them. Understanding why students and/or instructors might choose the online environment will also assist administrators in developing successful, quality online programs that enrich the experiences for both students and instructors.

## BACKGROUND

In 1981, the first online classes were developed at the School of Management and Strategic Studies at Western Behavior Sciences Institute in La Jolla, California. An evaluation of the program, and the discussions that took place, revealed that the quality of the online course was higher than the information collected in the traditional classroom setting (Feenberg, 1999).

Since that time, a number of studies have compared the effectiveness of online instruction to traditional lecture formats. Findings have admittedly been mixed (Rivera, & McAlister, 2001; Ungerleider & Burns, 2004; Zhang, 2005). However, a majority of the studies find no difference in student performance and student satisfaction, regardless of the delivery format (Lim, Kim, Chen & Ryder, 2008; McFarland & Hamilton, 2006). Online courses that are properly designed can certainly have the same level of quality and rigor as comparative face-to-face courses (Brown, 2012).

Kilburn (2005) developed the following conceptual map regarding student motivations to take an online course at a particular University in the Midwest. (see Figure 1)

*Figure 1. Motivations to take online courses*
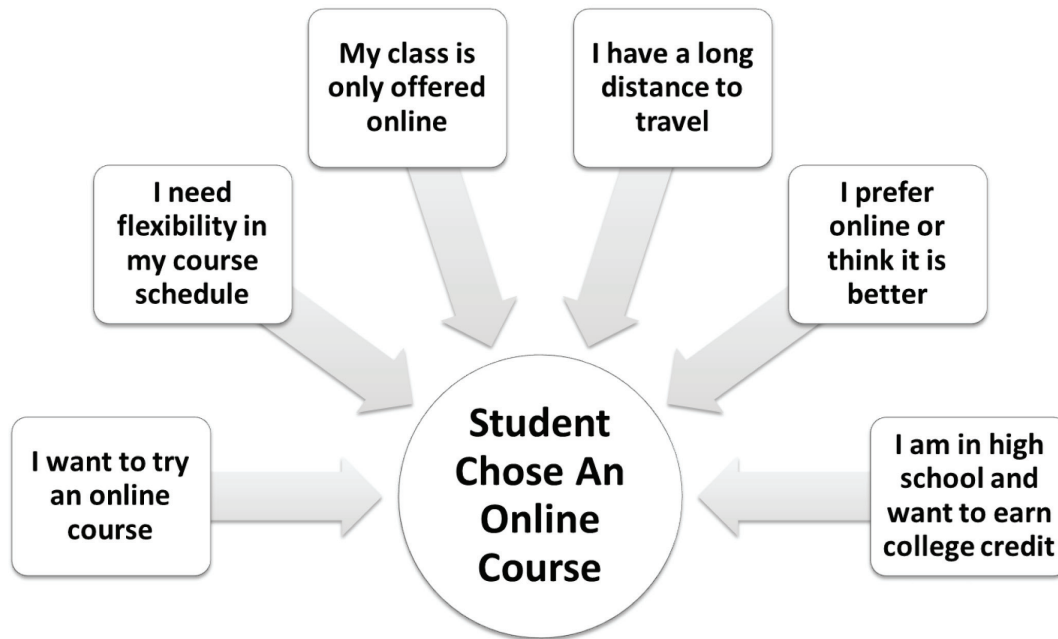


## ATTRIBUTES OF SUCCESSFUL STUDENTS AND INSTRUCTORS

In the upcoming section, an examination of student and instructor characteristics and how each of those different roles contributes to the quality of an online course will help provide insight into the foundational underpinnings of web-based learning.

## Student Characteristics

It is estimated that five out of six students taking an online course are employed and would not be able to attend traditional classes (Thomas, 2001). Literature suggests that the growth in online courses is based on attracting new students rather than "stealing" from students enrolled in current on-campus programs (Mangan, 2001, Thomas, 2001). Moore and Kearsley (1996) and Hardy and Boaz (1997) found that most distance learners are working adults. Undergraduate online students are commonly older, married, or have dependents (Dotterweich & Rochelle, 2012; Sikora & Carroll, 2003). Studies also suggest that online students are often busier than traditional students, with more occupational and familial obligations (Carr, 2000; Dutton, et al., 2002). Regardless of gender or age,

students who need the flexibility of online or distance education classes in order to obtain a degree may find online to be a good option for them (Dotterweich & Rochelle, 2012).

Some researchers have attempted to identify student abilities that suggest whether a student will complete an online course, or be less satisfied with an online course, in comparison to the traditional classroom setting. Kilburn (2005) found that positive characteristics identified in studies stress the importance of an active versus passive student role in an online course and include: self-motivation and the ability to organize thought (Hardy & Boaz, 1997), prior experience with technology (Richards & Ridley, 1997), positive attitude regarding the subject matter (Coussment, 1995), learning and personality styles (Saunders, et al., 1998), self-selection of online courses versus forced-choice (Thomerson & Smith, 1996), intrinsic motivation, and self-reported explorative behavior (Martens, Bastiaens, & Kirschner, 2007). Studies have consistently reported that students need to develop self-regulatory abilities and take control of their learning (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2004; Picciano, 2001; Rovai, 2003; Saba, 2000). Shea and Bidjerano (2010) suggested that motivation, self-efficacy, and self-regulation are the central components of learner presence in an online course.

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