

# Nurse Practitioner: Is Online Learning for You?

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## ABSTRACT

Online or blended learning is growing as an option for nurses who want to continue their education to improve patient care outcomes, advance their careers, and contribute to a more effective and efficient health care system. As the options for education increase so do both opportunity and responsibility for the learner. Only an informed advanced practice registered nurse can decide whether an online program is right for him or her. There are both personal and institutional variables that can guide the potential student in making this choice and reliable resources and strategies for collecting critical information.

**Keywords:** accreditation of educational programs, advanced practice nursing education, blended learning, clinical learning, distance education, postsecondary online learning, quality online education, regulation of nursing education, regulation of online degree programs, remote clinical learning online learners

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Are you thinking about online education to become an advance practice nurse practitioner (APRN), or are you a busy APRN who is considering online education for your doctor of nursing practice (DNP) degree? Most APRNs value continuing education and lifelong learning. Many of us want to continue our education for professional advancement and to improve our practice. Distance learning DNP programs may seem most ideal to the master's-prepared APRN who is very clinically experienced and returning to academia for the DNP. Some students, and even educators, are skeptical about online learning, but the numbers of online programs and students are growing in the United States.

“Distance education” has been available for many years but was limited to correspondence courses in which assignments and feedback were mailed between student and instructor. Not until the 1990s, when the Internet and computer technology began to become readily available to individuals, did electronic “online” remote learning

become possible. Distance learning is no longer all “asynchronous” with faculty and student interactions separated by time but can also have “synchronous” or live components. Some programs are completely online. Others are “blended” (ie, learners do some of their work online and some of their work on-site and in real time). The American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) identifies 225 schools offering accredited DNP programs, including both entry programs and programs for master's-prepared APRNs on their Web site at <https://www.aacn.nche.edu/students/nursing-program-search>. Currently, 81 programs offer the DNP program online.<sup>1</sup>

With so many program choices, how can APRNs decide which online, blended, or traditional on-site educational program will best meet their need to further their education? If you decide that online education is a good option, how do you decide which program is right for you? This article describes personal characteristics and program considerations that can help guide a potential student making this choice.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL ONLINE STUDENTS

First and foremost, each APRN must ask himself or herself the following question: am I an online learner? Different strategies work best for different learners. Here are some characteristics of individuals who are most likely to be a good match for online learning strategies.

1. Self-discipline: although online courses can offer more flexibility in scheduling, they require more self-discipline and independence than on-site, on-campus courses. Some students may find this uncomfortable and not suitable for their learning style. They may miss face-to-face (F2F) interaction with an instructor and peers. Learners must participate actively and seek assistance from their faculty when needed because in the online environment the faculty may not be able to see the confusion of students as they can in the F2F environment. F2F interaction may also help to keep some students on track. In the online environment, learners have to start and work on tasks on their own without someone keeping them focused. Learners have to be self-disciplined in order to follow the class schedule and meet deadlines
2. Learning style: successful online learners are usually independent, self-motivated, collaborative, and good participants. Without the F2F interaction to stimulate and reinforce motivation, it is possible for some learners to get lost with the online class work. There are multiple resources available to help learners identify their fit with the qualities and the requirements for successful online learning. The Grasha-Reichmann Learning Style Inventory<sup>2</sup> identifies 6 learning styles: independent, avoidant, collaborative, dependent, competitive, and participant. Learners can take this inventory online to identify their learning style. The Minnesota State University<sup>3</sup> provides a list of skill requirements for online education for potential students on their Web site

3. Computer literacy: an essential skill for online learning today is computer literacy including Internet skills, search engines, and library database navigation. Unlimited computer access is essential as is 24-hour access to technological support. Related to computer literacy is the need for strong reading and writing skills. Because most of the online material is likely to be presented in the written form, strong reading and critical thinking skills are essential
  4. Time and time management skills: time management is another essential requirement. Keep in mind that learners need about 12 hours per week to successfully complete a 3-credit course online. Identifying sufficient time to devote to each course is essential
  5. Proactive student engagement: the University of Illinois<sup>4</sup> identifies the need to be open-minded about sharing life, work, and educational experiences as part of the learning process. Sometimes a key concern of a traditional student is that there would not be a sense of community in the online environment. Such a student may discover that the online experience provides a different opportunity to meet others. It is through this sharing that course concepts crystallize and facilitate learning. Meaningful and quality input into the virtual classroom, often as contributions to an online “discussion board” or “forum,” is an essential part of the online learning process. Time must be allotted in this process to allow for the careful consideration of responses. There is no “back row” in an online course. The testing and challenging of ideas is encouraged; learners will not always be right. Learners must be goal oriented and prepared to accept a challenge
- These attributes for success in the online environment are consistently supported by the literature. Time, technology, initiative, and competence were the factors that instructors identified as predictors of success for students in the online classroom in 1 study.<sup>5</sup> In another, online students were asked to identify the strategies that facilitated successful completion of their online graduate courses. Included in their listing were time management, staying

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