

Five Questions for Christians to Ask About Online Courses

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FIVE QUESTIONS FOR CHRISTIANS TO ASK ABOUT ONLINE COURSES

"Are online courses a good way to learn?"

I hear this question often, and from a variety of people. Lately, though, the question has shifted. Now, many Christians ask, "What should a Christian look for in an online course or program?" As more people consider online learning, many Christians wonder how to choose quality courses and programs that help them to grow not only in their academic, technical, or professional knowledge, but also in their faith development and their ability to live as Christ followers.



This is an important question. As Christ's followers, we should choose education that deepens our knowledge and helps us to serve Christ more effectively. Yet, many Christians feel uncertain about how to find excellent online learning experiences. This is understandable. After all, many of us are relatively new to online education. Additionally, the quality of online coursework can vary from one place to the next, just as it does in traditional or face-to-face education. When we add in the challenge of finding excellent education that is also seriously Christian, one may wonder where to start.

So, we're back to the question: "What should I as a Christian look for in an online course or program?" To help answer this question, I am sharing five fundamental questions to ask—along with characteristics to watch for—as you research your options. As someone whose daily work focuses on the development of Christ-centered online education, I've found that the questions that matter most are enduring questions

that have long been at the heart of teaching and learning.

WHY—WHAT'S THE GOAL?

As you consider your options, look at promotional materials, advertised goals and outcomes, and the definitions of "success" implied through the learning objectives, readings, and assignments. Talk to professors. What reasons for completing the course or degree are given to motivate students? Is the emphasis mostly on personal achievement, a bigger paycheck, and career advancement? Or, are there deeper motivations that are continually apparent, such as better knowing our Lord, serving our neighbors, and caring for God's creation?

WHO MATTERS?

Ask about the learning activities and the requirements for class participation. Is it all about you working for your individual gain, or are you asked to care about your classmates and learn from and with them? Will you be held responsible to contribute to discussions and projects in ways that help others, and to be your brothers' and sisters' keeper in their learning? Look again at the syllabus and program materials with another eye to whose voices and concerns matter. In addition to learning from the usual experts in the field, will you encounter thoughtful Christian perspectives on these topics through readings, guest speakers, and assignments? How will your learning enable you to help those in need, and how will you connect with and learn from those you hope to serve? Will the texts you read, hear, or watch and the people who you meet through your online learning bring you and your classmates closer to the vision in Revelation where every tongue, tribe,

and nation are gathered together to worship the King?

WHAT IS "GOOD," AND HOW DO WE KNOW?

Truly Christ-centered education starts with God's creational design for his world and his people. It mourns sin and helps us to see how every area of life is broken and calling out for Christ's healing and renewal. This should be true in Christ-centered online learning as well. Review course descriptions and talk with faculty to learn what issues you will be asked to think about. Will you be guided to consider God's will for creation and culture through study of the Bible? Will you be asked to carefully analyze the world around you to understand the ways in which it follows or strays from God's will? How will you be prompted to notice how humans make idols out of ideas, products, and activities? In addition to previewing content, notice how the course or program defines what is "good" for learning. Ask to see the online learning environment—perhaps through a prepared video or by requesting to join a video call where you can see some screen shares of actual courses. Do you see God-honoring excellence in creative teaching methods, delightful course activities, beautiful design of the learning environment, and high expectations for learning?

HOW WILL YOU BE CHALLENGED AND CHANGED?

Christ-centered education requires much more than the "delivery" of facts and training in skills. Christ followers are called to be transformed (Romans 12:2). Christ-centered education, whether in person or online, should inspire and equip learners to think and live differently. Preview course materials and assignments and ask questions of

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In All Things is a journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation. We want to expand our imagination for what the Christian life—and life of the mind—can accomplish. In pursuit of this end, we will engage in conversation with diverse voices across a wide range of traditions, places, and times.

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instructors. Talk with current and former. How will you be equipped to take a closer, more critical look at your habits, possessions, activities, and values? How will you be taught to better understand some of the leading ideas, arguments, and movements of our day—responding to them in ways that attract others to the light and love of Christ? How will you be inspired to use what you learn so that you can be the hands and feet of Jesus in your work, home, church, and community?

HOW WILL YOU BE CARED FOR?

Jesus calls us to love with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Notice that he connects our minds with every part of our being. Learners are whole people, and this should be reflected in online learning, too. As you interact with staff and faculty to learn more about the online options you are considering, are you treated with respect and kindness? Are you encouraged to think about God's calling for your life and how to use the talents he gives you? Are there readily available academic support services to help you, and do faculty

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prioritize relational learning through personalized feedback, online office hours, phone calls, video meetings, and email exchanges with students?

If you were to become very ill or experience an event that interrupted your education, what policies would protect you academically and financially, and how would you be supported when you were ready to

return? Do the course schedules and homework expectations encourage you not only to learn and build relationships with your instructors and classmates, but also to thrive and be fully present in the rest of your life as a family member, friend, neighbor, and active member of your church?

Ultimately, in online education, the centrality of Christ should be evident in every aspect of the experience, including the stated and implied purpose for learning, curriculum that reflects Christ's rule as Lord over all, teaching that shows the care of Jesus, and learning activities that call students to love classmates, community, and creation. As we are reminded in Dordt's founders' vision, education should be "permeated with the spirit and teaching of Christianity." That's true online, too.



DR. LEAH ZUIDEMA
VICE PRESIDENT FOR ONLINE AND GRADUATE EDUCATION

Professor Emeritus of Philosophy **Dr. John Kok** served as editor for the (now translated) three-volume work of Abraham Kuyper titled *Pro Rege: Living Under Christ's Kingship*. These volumes published by Lexham Press, totaling almost 1,500 pages, appeared in 2016, 2017, and 2019. A Spanish translation of Kok's *Patterns of the Western Mind* (1998) was published by Dordt Press in 2019 under the title *Los Patrones de la Mente Occidental: Una Perspectiva Cristiana Reformada*.



Health and Human Performance Professor **Nate Wolf** was named GPAC Men's Cross Country Coach of the Year for the 2019 season. Wolf coached the team to their second consecutive GPAC title and the program's second straight NAIA National Championship Meet appearance.



Dordt's **Master of Social Work (MSW) program is now accepting applications** for the fall 2020 semester. The MSW program offers a Christ-centered social work education with courses that are 100 percent online. For more information, visit dordt.edu/msw.

Dordt University received three silver awards from the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) District VI. The awards included magazine publishing improvement for *The Voice of Dordt University*, institution-wide branding effort for Dordt University, and a Dordt University commercial spot.

According to Dordt's Career Development Center, **99 percent of Dordt's class of 2019 found employment or were accepted into graduate school within six months of graduation**. "Most students choose to attend college to get a good job and begin a career," says Amy Westra, associate director of career development. "The consistently high career outcome rate at Dordt University may help alleviate some concerns about finding a job and entering the workforce." Learn more at dordt.edu/news/49882.

Dordt University is one of three finalists for a Salesforce.org Summit Award. The Excellence in Innovation Award recognizes a college or university that is using Salesforce, a computing service specializing in customer relationship management, to fuel innovation in recruiting, student success, advancement, marketing, community, and engagement.

Vice President for Online and Graduate Education **Dr. Leah Zuidema** was quoted in a *U.S. News and World Report* article titled "How to Win a Fulbright Scholarship."

In October, Admissions Counselor **Cody Kaemingk** ('15) and Digital Content Strategist **Jordan Harmelink** ('16) presented "Dordt University: A Salesforce Story" at the Salesforce upper Midwest group meeting in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

