Faculty Work Comprehensive List

11-5-2019

# 5 Questions for Christians to Ask about Online Courses and Degrees

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## Abstract

"Learners are whole people, and this should be reflected in online learning, too."

Posting about evaluating online courses and programs from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

https://inallthings.org/5-questions-for-christians-to-ask-about-online-courses-degrees/

## Keywords

In All Things, Christians, web-based instruction, academic degrees

## Disciplines

Christianity | Higher Education

## Comments

*In All Things* is a publication of the Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt University.

November 5, 2019

# 5 Questions for Christians to Ask about Online Courses & Degrees

**Leah Zuidema**

"Are online courses a good way to learn?"

I hear this question often, and from a variety of people. Parents wonder about online courses to expand the choices available to their middle and high school students. College students wonder if online courses could help them with their schedules, speeding their pathway to a degree. In the workplace, adults look for online coursework that can improve their skills, deepen their knowledge, or prepare them for a career change or promotion.

Lately, the question has shifted. Around the world, many people now accept that online education can be worthwhile. As more people of all ages take the plunge into 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 the development of their faith and their practical ability to live as followers of Christ. The newer question that many Christians are asking is, "What should I as a Christian look for in an online course or program?"

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 you, 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 what matters most in the online frontier isn't what is new and shiny, or technical and complicated. The questions that matter most are enduring questions that have long been at the heart of teaching and learning.

1. **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?

2. **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, or assignments? How will your learning enable you to help those in need (as emphasized throughout the Old and New Testaments), and how will you be stretched to 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?

3. **What is "good," and how do we know?**

Truly Christ-centered education goes back to the beginning—to 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. Is it clear that you will 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 guided to critique or question the ways that each field of study makes idols out of human ideas, products, and activities? In addition to previewing course content, notice how the course or program defines what is "good" for learning. Ask for a preview of the online learning environment— perhaps through a prepared video or by requesting to join a video call where you are allowed to 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?

4. **How will you be challenged and changed?**

Christ-centered education requires much more than the "delivery" of facts and "training" in skills. Christ's 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 the course materials and assignments and ask questions of instructors. Talk to current students and those who have completed the course or program. How will you be equipped to take a closer and more critical look at your habits, possessions, activities, and values? How will you be prompted 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, your home, your church, and your community?

5. **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 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?

It is worth the time and effort to investigate your online learning options. Christ-centered education should be "permeated with the spirit and teaching of Christianity." In the online classroom, this should be evident in every aspect of the learning experience, from the purpose for learning, to curriculum that reflects Christ's rule as Lord over all, to teaching that shows the care of Jesus, and learning activities that call students to love their classmates and community members.

Whether you are starting a degree or certificate program, or simply enrolling yourself or your child in a single online course, you can use these five guiding questions to help you get to the heart of the issues that matter in Christ-centered learning.