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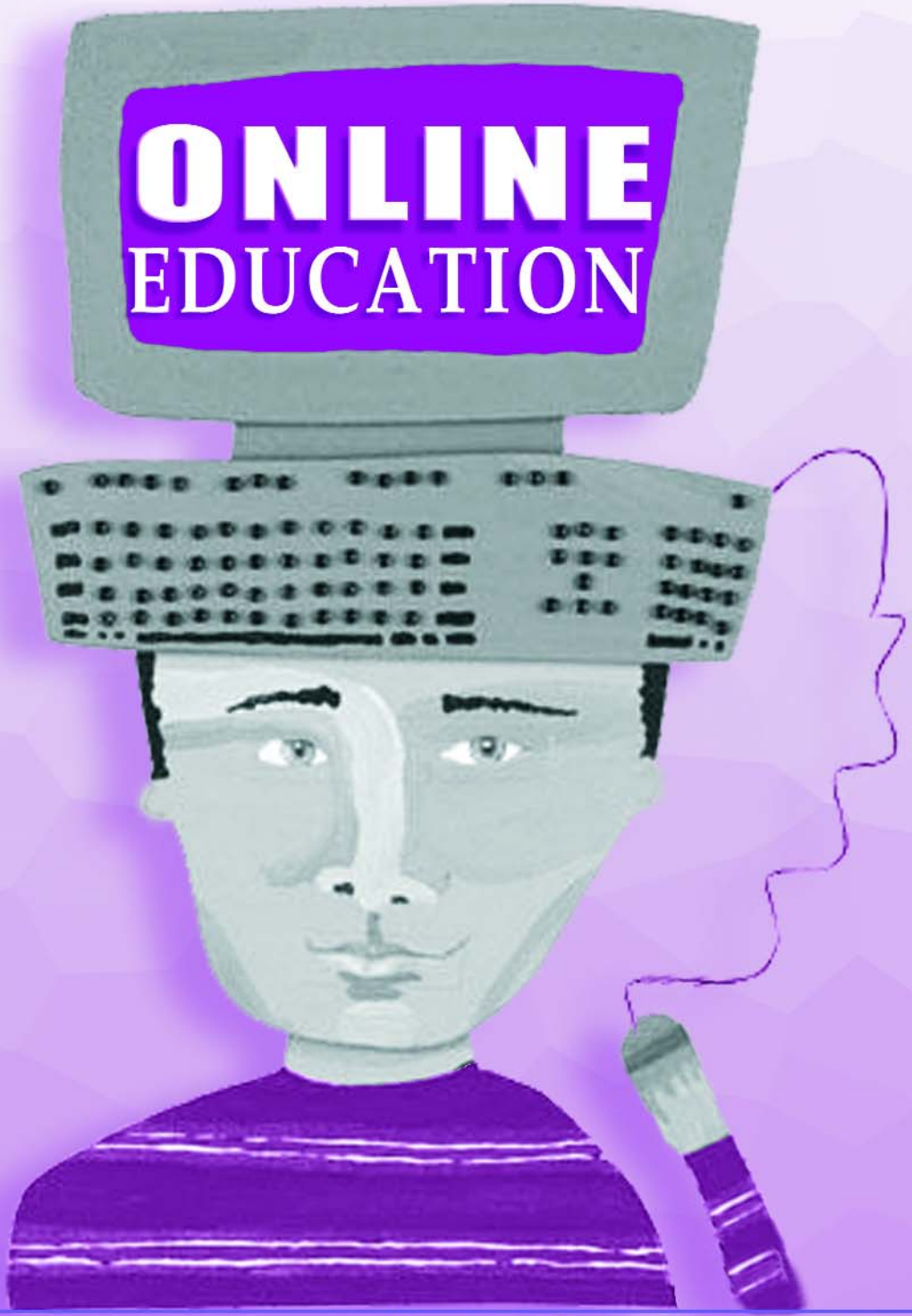

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GUIDELINES FOR SELECTING QUALITY K–12 ONLINE COURSES

BY DR. PATRICIA DEUBEL

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is a condensed version. To read the complete article go to http://thejournal.com/articles/17079.

Your district might have decided not to develop its own online courses (time-consuming and expensive). If so, consider the following when selecting online courses provided by other entities:

CURRICULUM

- Does the curriculum align with standards?

The syllabus should contain a complete course description, learning objectives and outcomes, assignments, rubrics, resources and reference materials.

- Are students able to deeply explore content for mastery?

Resources should include grade-appropriate sites, student search engines, online libraries and bookstores, access to museum holdings and primary documents, use of real data and communication with experts. Courses should be designed for high degrees of student-teacher and student-student interaction and feedback.

- Are course expectations apparent?

Course descriptions should outline attendance and grading policies, participation expectations, tests, academic honesty, use of copyrighted material, Internet safety and online behavior. Minimum technology skills required should be stated.

- Is the course accredited by a recognized agency?

Have local/state/national education departments or agencies endorsed the courses?

INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN

- Is a learning model evident?

Learning models are ways to present content, i.e. inductive or deductive reasoning, apprenticeship learning (concepts are presented procedurally), incidental learning (students learn from a series of events) or discovery learning (inquiry-based learning where students draw on their own experiences to discover new truths).

- Has research on learning theory been used in the design?

Look for courses featuring Universal Design for Learning (www.cast.org/teachingeverystudent/ideas/tes) which provides a framework for individualizing learning in a standards-based environment. Courses should be motivating and appeal to various learning styles (visual, auditory, hands-on) through extensive use of multimedia. They should have options to increase accessibility of content for all learners, including those with physical and learning disabilities and non-native speakers of English.

TEACHER QUALITY

- Are online teachers licensed? Have they demonstrated subject matter expertise? Have they been trained to teach online?

Teachers should be "highly qualified" in the subject matter and competent to teach in the online environment. They may need to assist students with technical problems. They need good written communication skills to provide timely feedback and regular progress reports. They must monitor the frequency and quality of student participation in discussions and assist students with time management. They must be able to adapt learning and assessments to accommodate students with disabilities, monitor the effectiveness of the curriculum and instructional practices and provide intervention for failing students.

STUDENT ROLES

- Can students determine if they are good candidates for online learning?

Students must have regular access to computer hardware and software appropriate for online learning. An online questionnaire and sample online learning experience should be available to help students determine if online learning is right for them.

Students should understand that successful online learning requires strong organizational skills; a high motivation to learn; good reading, writing and computer skills and the ability to ask questions.

The North American Council for Online Learning lists the top ten myths about online learning and virtual schools.

Myth: Online courses lack interaction.
Truth: Students typically have more one-on-one interactions with their teachers and fellow students in online courses, especially when team projects are assigned. Students who are shy or do not think well "on their feet" tend to contribute more in online environments.

Myth: Online courses are easier than regular courses.
Truth: Most online courses are not condensed or easier versions of regular courses. They are aligned to rigorous state standards. They require active participation, are supervised by state-certified teachers and administer state assessment tests.

Myth: Online teachers have easy jobs.
Truth: Online teachers report that they work much harder and spend more hours online than in the classroom. Online instructional design, writing, management of instruction and communicating with students can take considerable time and be quite different from what goes on inside a traditional classroom.

Myth: Online courses are an "add-on" to already burdened school systems and teachers.
Truth: Online education is an opportunity to take advantage of online resources and enable teachers to help students learn in ways that match their needs and learning styles. Online courses may or may not decrease costs, depending on how budgets are allocated and how online courses are integrated into instruction.

Myth: Online courses have to be developed from scratch.
Truth: Many online courses already exist that meet state standards and are accredited by recognized organizations. These resources have been developed by states, private business and independent organizations.

Myth: A student is more likely to cheat online.
Truth: Cheating is no more prevalent online than in the classroom. There are many technological ways to deter and track it. The online venue and communication enables teachers to get to know their students' idiosyncrasies and skills much better.

Visit www.nacol.org to find all of the top ten myths.

ASSESSMENT

- Are assessments authentic, formative, regular and summative? Do they guard against cheating?

Assessments should include such measures as contributions to online discussions, completion of online assignments, portfolio submissions, projects/presentations, tests/quizzes and student reflections on their own learning. Students should evaluate their own work using rubrics.

Teachers should publicize honor codes. Test questions should require students to apply knowledge with memory-testing questions used sparingly. Teachers should use software with test administration features, design alternate tests, set a reasonable time for test completion and learn students' writing styles before testing. Test questions should require students to provide personal details. Local proctoring can be used if security is an issue. Teachers should regard every test as open-book and view assessment as part of the learning process.

MANAGEMENT AND SUPPORT SYSTEM

- Are secure administrative technical and personal support systems available to instructors and students, which ensure uninterrupted, successful participation in the online environment?

Student work and personal data must be secure as required by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Technical assistance must be available to students and teachers. Schools should select someone to provide on-site support and to serve as a liaison with the online program staff.

Course management systems should enable interactions and contain features to monitor student progress and performance, track their time on task and intervene on an individual basis.

TECHNOLOGICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

- Does the technological infrastructure support attainment of learning outcomes for all students?

Learning outcomes should determine the technology used, not the other way around. The course Web site must meet Web accessibility standards. Sufficient bandwidth must be available to support communication and engagement with course content.

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