

Online Students Develop Marketable Professional Skills

by [Maria Teresa Alzuru](#) and [Matthea Marquart](#)

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Key Takeaways

- **Students** preparing to take **online courses** anticipated **gaining professional skills** in addition to their online learning of the course content.
- **A survey of the marketable skills** students wanted to obtain found that **38 percent chose all 10 of the professional options** offered as possible answers.
- The **top three skills students wanted to gain** were "Confidence with online technologies and environments," "Self-motivation, initiative, and independent learning," and "Experience with multiple types of online software."

Maria Teresa Alzuru, Associate Director, Online and International Initiatives, School of Social Work, and Matthea Marquart, Online Support Project Manager, School of Continuing Education, Columbia University

Students today face a growing list of questions when pursuing higher education online. An online program's appeal includes saving on relocation costs, avoiding lengthy commutes, and having more flexibility to balance competing priorities such as family responsibilities. Although an online degree might look appealing and convenient, students must also assess their education's value and consider whether their degree will help them find a job after graduation. Online students in particular might need to persuade prospective employers of the unique professional skills they developed while completing their coursework; according to interviews conducted by [U.S. News & World Report](#), most employers rarely question an online education, but a few remain wary.

Those few wary employers concern academic leaders as well. According to "[Grade Level: Tracking Online Education in the United States](#)," in 2014 almost 40 percent of academic leaders surveyed worried about online education's potential lack of acceptance by prospective employers, including 37 percent of leaders at private, not-for-profit institutions, 33 percent of leaders at public institutions, and 47 percent of leaders at for-profit institutions.

In this article we share the results of a survey of 188 students preparing to take online courses at Columbia University's School of Social Work (CSSW) during the 2014–15 academic year. We hope the results will help online students — as well as instructors and administrators — consider the marketable skills they can gain while taking courses online.

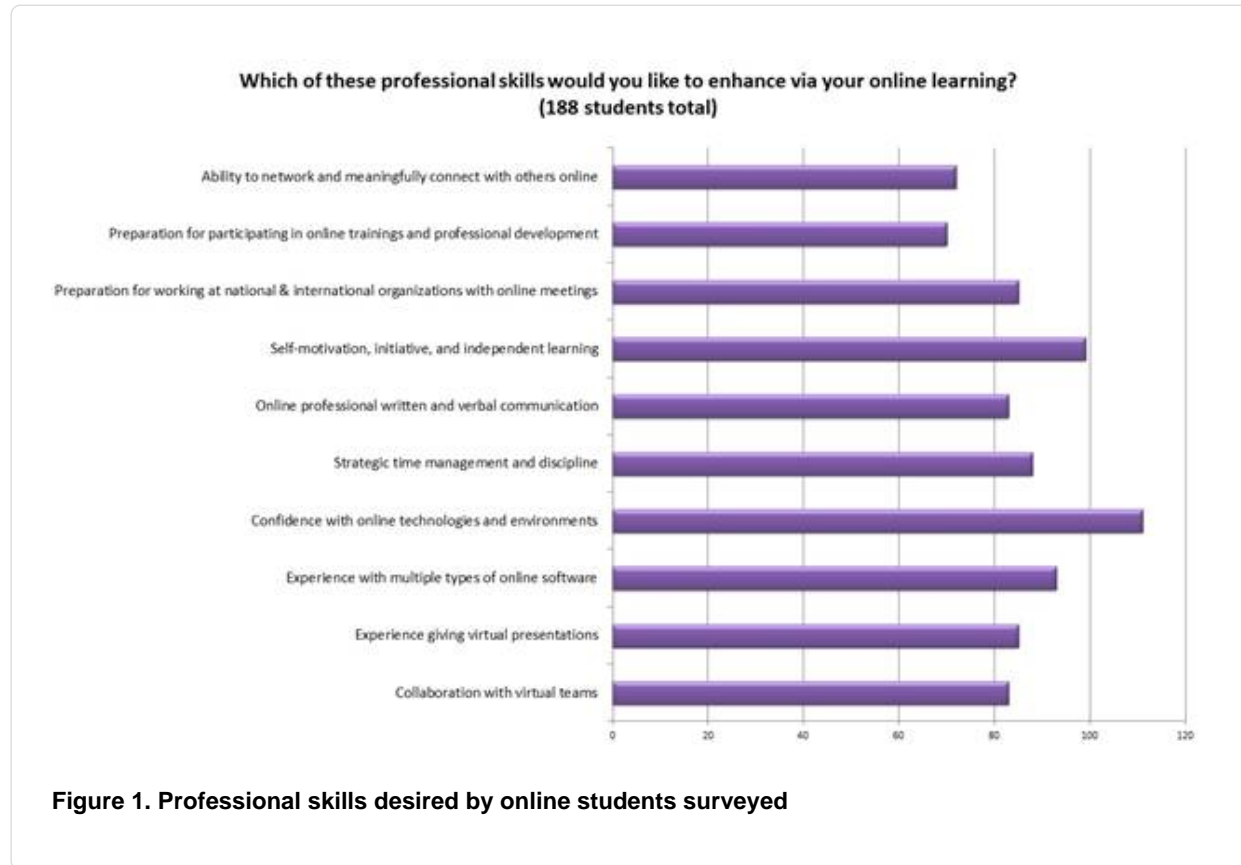
What Professional Skills Do Online Students Want?

The results were obtained from 10 orientation sessions CSSW offered to all students enrolled in one of its new online courses. CSSW is expanding its Master of Science in Social Work program to include an online option, and for the past two years has given residential students the option to take some of their coursework online as part of a beta test. The online courses include both asynchronous homework that students do independently throughout the week, and weekly

live synchronous class sessions on a webinar platform. To prepare the students to do well online, CSSW requires students taking online courses to participate in orientation sessions. These sessions walk students through the online platforms they will use for their courses, make sure their technology is set up properly, and provide them with basic tips on how to succeed in an online course, including how to participate in class and the importance of time management.

We asked the following multiple-choice question during each orientation session: "Which of these professional skills would you like to enhance via your online learning?" Students selected as many choices as they wanted from 10 answers. The question and the answers were designed to help students consider the additional benefits of taking an online course, beyond learning the course content.

Of the 10 choices, the top three answers surveyed students chose were "Confidence with online technologies and environments" (111 votes, or 59 percent), "Self-motivation, initiative, and independent learning" (99 votes, or 53 percent), and "Experience with multiple types of online software" (93 votes, or 49 percent). The full survey results appear in figure 1.



The survey results indicate that students were interested in developing a variety of professional skills while taking online courses. At least 38 percent of the students chose all of the skills presented as options. For us, this exercise had the double benefit of telling us more about the students who chose to take online classes, as well as setting an expectation for students from the start that they would get more out of the online learning experience than they might have thought possible.

Checking in After Course Completion

After the academic year ended and grades were posted, we checked back in with some of the students who had taken online courses, to see whether they had developed the professional skills they desired.

Maciel Jimenez, who chose to take several online classes in her first year at CSSW, reported that "My confidence has increased, as has my accountability, strategic time management, and online professional written and verbal communication, thus furthering my professional development." We found her perspective interesting because she focused on professional attributes rather than technical skills. In contrast, Francene Campbell particularly appreciated the online skills she developed:

"I learned ways to utilize materials for virtual presentations and apply techniques that engaged and facilitated interaction using chat rooms, discussion boards, blogging platforms, and web chat systems. These skills will allow me to efficiently network online with other professionals, and conduct conference meetings using various online technologies and environments."

CSSW Management Fellow Derrick Li-Wei Kung, who graduated in May, had a similar point of view. He looked to the future when he said, "The online course has helped develop my virtual presentation and communication skills, which is key as I will likely be in positions in which I am expected to deliver effective online trainings and webinars." Kung came into the process feeling skeptical of the online experience, but found himself won over and better prepared to enter a job market that increasingly relies on digital communications.

It is not just the students who have developed an appreciation for online education. Steven Schinke, D'Elbert and Selma Keenan Professor of Social Work, who has taught both Statistics and Social Work Research online for the past two years, said,

"The online environment appears to offer students a fun, engaging way to ask questions, present their ideas, and interact with me and their colleagues. They also learn to present themselves within the online platform in a manner that demonstrates their confidence and capabilities with this leading-edge learning method. Overall, I have found that online students dig deeply into the course content and evince professional skill sets that embody what we at CSSW set as our standard for graduate school education."

We found his viewpoint compelling, as Professor Schinke came to online teaching with over 30 years of classroom experience.

We also found 2015 graduate and Management Fellow Kathleen Ebbitt's story compelling, as she demonstrated a real-world application of professional skills gained from online courses:

"I was offered a job three weeks prior to my formal graduation from CSSW as the lead content editor at a small start-up focused on meditation. I oversee a small staff of writers largely online, and my online management courses at CSSW have enhanced my ability to communicate, delegate, and strategically plan my team in a digital space. Having practice through my online classes in coordinating in digital teams gave me a definite leg-up as a candidate during the interview process, and the strategic time management and discipline I learned from my online education has helped me immensely as a new manager. Further, I feel confident in my ability to meaningfully connect and manage staff online — even though some of my writers are living as far away as Peru!"

Developing Professional Skills in Future Courses

The field of online learning remains wide open for development and interpretation. It also has an almost universal impact on higher education; according to a [2013 EDUCAUSE survey](#) of 311 member institutions, only 11 percent of institutions surveyed have never offered an online course, and most them plan to do so in the future.

We hope that sharing our survey will help those concerned about the value of online learning for students. At CSSW, we will continue to administer this survey to students during their online orientation sessions to achieve that same double benefit of learning about their goals and giving them a view of the additional possibilities available to them in their online classes. As we learned through this survey and follow-up interviews, students began their online coursework interested in developing professional skills as well, and some students described a powerful impact on their development afterwards. We suggest that faculty and administrators help their students reflect on the distinct additional benefits of taking online courses, to help students notice and articulate all their accomplishments. This might also help assuage any fears about negative employer perceptions of online learning, as our survey and follow-up demonstrated that online students end up with sought-after professional skills they might not otherwise gain.

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Maria Teresa Alzuru

Maria Teresa Alzuru is Associate Director of Online and International Initiatives at the Columbia University School of Social Work. In this capacity, Maria manages the School of Social Work's new online Master of Science in Social Work program, providing support to faculty, administrators and students involved with the online program as well as managing all program development and execution.

With a keen focus on project management, Maria's prior experiences include special events management and fundraising at American Ballet Theatre as well as program coordination and forum planning for The Carter Center's Americas Program. Additionally, Maria's interest in research led her to pursue a Master of Arts in International Affairs with a focus on Media and Culture from The New School that led to an International News internship at NBC News. She presented her Master's thesis on political discourse at the IAMCR (International Association of Media & Communication Research) 2013 conference in Dublin, Ireland.

A native of Venezuela, Maria spent most of her childhood in the southern United States and has lived in New York City for seven years. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from Columbia University. Her international experience includes a year of study abroad in Paris, France as well as a two-month Ford Foundation fellowship that grouped graduate students from The New School with graduate students from India and China to complete research projects in Kunming, China and Kolkata, India.

Maria's interest in mixed-methods research fuels initiatives to collect data about student and faculty experiences in the realm of online learning by conducting focus groups, individual interviews and surveys at different touch points throughout the academic year in hopes of developing best practices for both orienting and retaining students and instructors alike.



Matthea Marquart

Matthea Marquart has focused her professional life on education and training, both online and in person, since 2005. In her role as Online Support Project Manager at Columbia University's School of Continuing Education (SCE), she supports faculty and students during online class sessions by assuring a smooth event and by helping the online technology enhance the educational experience. She also coaches faculty on online instructional strategies and tools, and collaborates on continually improving the School's online courses. She recently earned a Certificate of Professional Achievement in Business by completing online business courses at SCE, which has helped her understand the student perspective of taking online courses.

At Columbia's School of Social Work, Matthea will serve as an instructor for the online course Macro Community Practice, which she is currently designing. She has served as a Teaching Assistant for two online courses.

Matthea's prior professional experience includes roles as National Director of Training at Building Educated Leaders for Life, President of the NYC Chapter of the National Organization for Women, and Director of Foundation and Government Relations at Inform, Inc. She has also worked internationally, in England, South Korea, and Spain.

Matthea holds an MS in Social Work from Columbia University and a BA in English from Emory University, where she completed a year at Oxford University and additional coursework at UC Berkeley. She has been a United Way of NYC Senior Fellow in the Nonprofit Leadership Development Institute at Baruch College, a member of the Community Resources Exchange 2009 Leadership Caucus, a Training Magazine Young Trainer to Watch, and a blogger for New York Nonprofit Press.

She enjoys writing and speaking about the unique opportunities and challenges of online instruction. She has published a dozen training and education-related articles since 2006 in the International Journal of Advanced Corporate Learning, LEARN, New York Nonprofit Press, T+D Magazine, and Training Magazine. She has presented at numerous conferences, including the Online Learning Consortium's International Conference, the Social Work Distance Education Conference, the International Conference on E-Learning in the Workplace, and The eLearning Guild New England Regional Instructional Design Symposium.

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