

Preparing for the Online Experience

Welcome to the MSW Web-based Program! VSU's Division of Social Work is on the "cutting edge" of education and technology with our "blended" (part face-to-face; mostly online) program. Knowing that you probably are curious, excited, and perhaps a little anxious about the program and how you will fare in a mostly-online environment, we have prepared information that you will **NEED TO KNOW BEFORE CLASSES BEGIN**. This information is found within the following **FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions)**:

Q: I'm on friendly terms with computers. Can't I wait to take SOWK 6100 (Information Technology Lab) in the fall?

*A: We **urge** you to take SOWK 6100 in the summer rather than concurrently with your fall courses. Consistently, at the end of their first year, web-based students have stated that they wish they had taken SOWK 6100 during the summer, before beginning the fall semester.*



Q: How can I determine whether I will be successful in my web-based courses?

A: Go to the Checklists on p. 6 and rate yourself! Complete the Self-Evaluation Checklist and the Technology Skills & Experience Checklist.

Q: Is the Program course work all online?

A: Your learning will take place in what we often refer to as "online," but in reality is a blended (sometimes called "hybrid") environment, about one-third face-to-face and about two-thirds online.



Q: How often will I come to Valdosta for classes?

A: You will come to VSU approximately five times during each semester, once per month for Friday evening and Saturday classes.

Q: What are the benefits of a hybrid MSW program?

*A: The work will be **just as intense** and **just as demanding** as the fully face to face courses. Nevertheless, you will have many of the conveniences of an all-online program without having to completely give up face-to-face contact with your peers and instructors. We believe that you will appreciate the fact that, while you can do most of your coursework at times that you select, you will still have monthly class meetings.*

Q: What will the online classes be like?

A: The main difference is simply in the "delivery" system. You will have a syllabus, textbook or readings pack. You will have assignments to be completed by you alone and sometimes with a small group. You will have readings. You will have private conversations (e-mail and/or discussions) with your instructor or with other students. You will have public conversations with small groups or the entire class via the

discussion board. Small and large group discussions will be conducted online, usually asynchronously (with postings and delayed responses rather than in “real time”). Some instructors may use chat rooms or periodic phone calls for “real-time” discussions. There will likely be much interaction and lively discussions between you and your instructors and classmates.

Q: What will the monthly face-to-face classes be like?

A: They will involve intense, in-class interaction between you, your classmates, and your instructors. These meetings may include large or small group discussions, activities, exercises, lectures, videos, and skill practice. The format and content of meetings will vary according to the course and instructor.



Q: Will I be “short-changed” by not having all my classes face-to-face?

A: There is increasing research evidence that a blended learning experience is equivalent to a strictly face-to-face learning experience. For example, not everyone learns best in a traditional lecture format class. Learning styles differ and blended courses offer learning experiences with a “buffet style” of formats: lecture, activities, case studies, classroom discussions and online discussions.



Q: How must I manage my time with these courses?



*A: The “good news:” you can study, submit assignments, or “discuss” in the middle of the night, in your pajamas! The “bad news” is that you simply cannot get behind on assignments or the required discussions and other interaction with students and instructors. You will spend **at least as much time** on your blended course as you would on any face-to-face course. Obviously, your ability to prioritize and manage your time to meet deadlines will be **vital** to your success. This simply cannot be emphasized enough! Previous students have told me that they read this information and had been forewarned, but did not anticipate how much work there would be.*

Q: What if my computer dies (or fails to cooperate!)?

A: You will need a reliable computer and a fast, reliable connection to the outside world. However, even “faithful” hard drives betray us. Networks can be down. Applications crash. There may be error messages or even worse, no response at all. We feel like we (or our documents) have just fallen into a “black hole.” So keep at hand your “help!” phone numbers (see p. 4., final Q. & A., “What kind of tech support...?”) and web sites. Someone usually will be available to provide help. Just like you keep phone numbers for babysitter and auto mechanics, you will now need one for your local “computer guru” in case you need to repair your computer.



Q: How will I use the library?

A: You will access the [VSU Odum Library](http://www.valdosta.edu/library/) at <http://www.valdosta.edu/library/>. In addition, reference librarians will be available for questions at 229-333-7149. The Odum Library has off-campus services called "[Anywhere Library Access](http://www.valdosta.edu/library/any.shtml)" found at <http://www.valdosta.edu/library/any.shtml>

Q: How will I communicate through just a keyboard?

A: When you communicate using a keyboard, there is an absence of body language and facial expression. You may feel inhibited at the beginning without the immediate feedback of others' smiles, frowns, or subtle signs of approval from classmates. On the other hand, you may respond to "invisibility" with a tendency to feel less inhibited and to express yourself more openly.

You and your classmates will draw on one another's ideas and establish relationships. Via the keyboard and WebCT Vista, you can experience a connection between your mind and another's not despite but because you do not have the distractions of sights and sounds that you would have in a face-to-face environment!

One handy feature of WebCT Vista allows you to save or print a permanent record of your online interactions (e-mail or discussion). In this way, you can re-evaluate or re-experience your online relationships, responses, and interactions any time you wish. Your feelings the first time you read someone's words may be quite different when you re-read them at a later time!

Q: How will I communicate with my instructor?

A: You will be given ways to communicate, including e-mail, phone, and appointments to meet face to face. In an online environment and considering the absence of body language and gestures, you will need to be assertive about your needs and let your instructor know if you have questions or concerns, whether about course content, procedures, evaluation, or technology difficulties. Every one of your instructors welcomes questions and feedback!

**Q: How can I know that my computer is adequate?**

A: You will relieve many "pre-program anxieties" by getting your computer "tuned up" and ready to go! The VSU "[Getting Started](http://www.valdosta.edu/vista/GettingStarted.shtml)" page at <http://www.valdosta.edu/vista/GettingStarted.shtml> tells you the minimum requirements for a computer, as well as checking and configuring your browser (e.g., Internet Explorer).



The majority of instructors and computer labs here on campus are currently using Microsoft Office 2007 with an operating system of Windows XP. The [VSU Tech Shop](http://services.valdosta.edu/techshop/) at <http://services.valdosta.edu/techshop/> sells MS Office 2007 Standard Edition to students at "academic prices" (full upgradeable versions of Word, PowerPoint, Outlook, Excel, and Access) for \$139.99. There are other titles and manufacturers as well as these. A word of caution ... Some new computers are sold with MS Works -- you CANNOT open a Word document with Works and retain the original formatting.

The VSU Tech shop has links with information about software, hardware, and networking (i.e., wireless and VSU's Wireless Internet Program).

Q: What computer-related skills do I need?

A: You will need basic skills in word processing (using MS Word) to succeed in the Program. You will also need knowledge of the Internet and basic e-mail. You will be given a VSU e-mail address that you will be required to use. However, your mail reader can be any that you prefer (e.g., Outlook Express or Eudora). You will also be communicating within WebCT.

Q: Is there anything else that I can do to prepare?

A: Yes! If you are unfamiliar with the Internet, I recommend that you practice searching and exploring the Internet in general (check out the search engine, Google at <http://www.google.com/>, and explore these recommended web sites in particular:

1. Tour our [Division of Social Work Home Page](http://www.valdosta.edu/sowk/) at <http://www.valdosta.edu/sowk/>, Take the time to explore our site and become acquainted with the Program!

2. The [VSU Odum Library](http://www.valdosta.edu/library/) at <http://www.valdosta.edu/library/> In addition, reference librarians will be available for questions at 229-333-7149. The Odum Library has off-campus services called "[Anywhere Library Access](http://www.valdosta.edu/library/any.shtml)" found at <http://www.valdosta.edu/library/any.shtml>

3. APA Style of Writing.

From the beginning of the first course, you will be writing using the formatting guidelines of the American Psychological Association. You will be given APA example papers, guides, and check sheets. You should purchase and use the APA Manual. You will need this crucial reference guide in almost all your courses.

Q: What kind of tech support is available from faculty or VSU?

A: You have several options but probably should start with the first and easiest:



1. You can get quick responses from VSU Information Technology by sending a message to: webct@valdosta.edu
Once you begin classes, you will want to call the VSU Help Desk t 229-245-4357 for computer and WebCT Vista questions. They are available by phone into the evenings and on weekends as well.

2. Our faculty is ready to give support and will try to answer your academic, procedural, or technical questions.



Self-Evaluation Checklist

If you can answer most of these questions with a "yes" or "most of the time," you can succeed in a hybrid or online program.

- ✓ I am able to easily access the Internet with a reliable, High-Speed (if possible) connection (not AOL).
- ✓ I like having a flexible, adjustable schedule.
- ✓ I am able to spend 10-15 (approximately) hours per week on coursework (not counting monthly class time). *This will vary by your abilities & experience.*
- ✓ I am comfortable with written communication.
- ✓ I am willing to actively communicate with my classmates and instructors electronically.
- ✓ When it comes to learning and studying, I am a self-directed person.
- ✓ I am able to manage my study time effectively and complete assignments on time.
- ✓ As a student, I enjoy working independently.
- ✓ In my studies, I set goals and have a high degree of initiative.

As you can probably see, these items target your abilities of self-direction, good writing, and a willingness to interact through the Internet.

Technology Skills & Experience Checklist

The following checklist includes the skills you will need in this program. These are basic skills that you should have acquired (previous knowledge) **before** you begin the Program's first course (SOWK 6100):

I can easily:

- ◆ Download and use simple (and free) applications and plug-ins

- Windows Media Player, QuickTime and Real Player
- Anti-virus programs (free on VSU site after you register)
- ◆ Compose, file, save, and print MS Word documents.
- ◆ Comfortably use (computer) folders and sub folders to store documents.
- ◆ Format documents: set margins, page numbers, and headers/footers in Word.
- ◆ Use an e-mail reader (e.g., MS Outlook Express; Eudora)
- ◆ Using e-mail, receive/open and send attached documents.
- ◆ Use a search engine (e.g., Google) to find information on the Internet.
- ◆ Navigate backward and forward among web pages and hyperlinks.
- ◆ Create "favorites/bookmarks" and print pages from the Internet.
- ◆ Call someone to fix my computer within 24 hours if I have a problem with it.

Both Checklists adapted from McVay, M. (2000), How to be a Successful Distance Learning Student. Boston: Pearson.

Prepared by Dr. Cindy Tandy, Updated May 2008