

# Distance Education



With the growth of technologies like the Internet and webcams, distance education is more prominent now and in greater demand than any time before. The U.S. Department of Education recently estimated that in 2000-2001 more than 3 million people were enrolled in distance education courses offered by two-year and four-year institutions. More than 2 million were enrolled in collegiate, credit-granting courses, 82 percent at the undergraduate level. Over half of the nation's two- and four-year colleges and universities offer distance education courses with an increasing number offering entire programs to be completed at a distance.

## What Is Distance Education?

Distance education usually means that there is a separation between the student and the primary or main campus offering courses. There can also be a separation between the student and the instructor and the other students in a class. There are many different methods of distance education. Some schools may use one method; some may use all of them. If you are considering a distance education program, research schools to learn not only if they offer distance education, but also which options they offer. For example, some schools offer classes at locations off campus or classes over the Internet and by teleconference. Others offer courses that combine classroom and Internet sessions. (See "Types of Distance Education" on the following page for a comprehensive list.)

### What Are the Benefits?

Distance education provides flexibility for working professionals, parents, or anyone with time constraints. Many programs allow students to work at their own pace and from the comfort of their own home during times that are convenient.

In some cases distance education can be more cost-effective than traditional classroom instruction. It can save commuting time, transportation costs, and child care expenses, among others.

Most importantly, distance education courses provide some people the chance to study who otherwise may not have the opportunity.

### Who Should Consider Distance Education?

As good as it may sound, distance education is not for everyone. To be successful in a distance education course, students need to have good computer and organizational skills and also be self-motivated and self-disciplined. Some students may require more face-to-face interaction than others. Distance education may be more demanding than traditional course interaction due to the fact that electronic communications can prove to be less clear than traditional methods.

To see if distance education is right for you, check these sites to take a self-assessment test:

[http://classes.kumc.edu/general/wbmodule/distance\\_quiz.htm](http://classes.kumc.edu/general/wbmodule/distance_quiz.htm)

<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/distancelearning/student/PreEnrollment.pdf>.

### Distance Education in High School

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NC DPI) offers online distance education opportunities to North Carolina public high schools at no direct cost to students or to schools. These classes allow students to take courses that their schools may not have otherwise been able to offer.

Course offerings include computer science, social studies, language arts, mathematics, science, workforce and life skills, and world languages. Course levels range from basic and honors to Advanced Placement. Online courses endorsed by the NC DPI/Distance Education Systems are provided by LEARN NC, the North Carolina School of Science and Math, and United Star Distance Education Consortium (USDLC). In addition, some high schools in North Carolina offer courses using the NC/Virtual High School (VHS) consortium.

School administrators or counselors select the courses their schools will offer. Facilitators are assigned to troubleshoot equipment problems or Internet access, act as a liaison between the students and the course instructors, and keep the students on task. Students are able to register for online courses during their regular registration and are scheduled to be in a computer lab with a facilitator during the instructional day. Before enrolling, students may be required to take

a pre-enrollment questionnaire to see if distance education is right for them. Students interested in taking online courses should first discuss the matter with their school counselors.

For more information on distance education opportunities for North Carolina public high school students, visit the NC DPI distance learning website:

<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/distancelearning>.

### **How Do You Select a Distance Education Undergraduate or Graduate Program?**

There are many variables to consider when you are selecting a distance education program. You should consider what type of distance education opportunities you are looking for and how much of the program you would like to complete by distance education. You should also think about the type of institution you want to attend. You may prefer to attend a traditional college or university that offers a distance education program or a virtual college available on the Internet.

### **Brick and Mortar vs. Virtual Schools**

Many virtual colleges are for-profit, meaning they are businesses that make money from tuition and fees. North Carolina community colleges, the 16 UNC campuses, and independent colleges and universities are nonprofit schools.

Another difference between traditional and virtual universities is the admission requirements. Since the majority of their students are working adults, virtual schools do not necessarily require standardized tests such as the ACT, SAT, GRE, and GMAT for admission. They often, however, require international students to take the TOEFL.

Like traditional colleges, other requirements for admission differ from institution to institution. Some virtual colleges require students to be currently working while completing a degree with their institution. Since these schools cater to the adult student, some have minimum age requirements. Depending on the school and program, students may have to submit letters of recommendation.

When considering any school, make sure that it is accredited by a regional accrediting agency recognized by the US Department of Education. If a school is not accredited by one of the six regional accrediting agencies, students would probably not be able to transfer their credits to another school, nor will their degrees be



recognized by most institutions and employers in the United States. In order to be considered for federal financial aid, students must attend an eligible school (eligibility as defined for Title IV funding of the Higher Education Act of 1965 as amended). Generally, a school must be accredited by one of the six regional accrediting agencies. Students who attend schools that are not accredited are not eligible for state financial aid. When looking at schools, ask if they are accredited by one of the following agencies:

- Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools
- New England Association of Colleges and Schools
- North Central Association of Colleges and Schools
- Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities
- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools
- Western Association of Schools and Colleges

Also, when considering a program at a virtual university, ask about travel commitments. Some programs require students to travel to satellite or campus sites for proctored tests and other class assignments. The satellite or campus site could be located in your state or elsewhere in the country. These trips can range from a day to a week, depending on the program.

## How Do You Pay for These Programs?

You may be able to use funding received for traditional education programs for distance education. Check with the financial aid office of the school offering the course to find out whether or not you can receive financial aid. As with traditional on-site courses, tuition costs will vary by institution. There may also be required books and computer specifications associated with a course.

## Types of Distance Education

**Audioconferences** are similar to conference calls because a telephone is all that is needed. Unlike basic conference calls, audioconferencing offers more optional features and allows almost a limitless number of individuals to participate simultaneously.

**Blended Learning** uses more than one type of delivery.

**Correspondence Courses** are also referred to as print-based courses. These courses are usually delivered by the mail, but some have email or fax options to enhance interaction between the student and instructor.

**Extension Courses** are classes or programs of study taught off campus. Some four-year colleges and universities may offer whole programs at a community college or other outreach center in order to serve populations who are unable to travel to campus and cannot be served by a local institution.

**Hybrid or Web-Enhanced Courses** combine traditional face-to-face interaction with required online coursework. Some courses may require students to meet at regularly scheduled times with additional work to complete online. Some courses may substitute some class meetings with online requirements such as chat discussions through school-monitored programs like Blackboard.

**Interactive Television (ITV)** uses the North Carolina Information Highway (NCIH) or local data lines to link classes. NCIH classrooms allow students to interact with students from other campuses in the state, providing an interactive learning environment using audio and video between two to five classrooms simultaneously.

**Online Courses** are completed over the Internet. Some courses may require students to make campus visits for testing or lab requirements. Some are not limited to

traditional semester start and end dates and times. Other courses may have scheduled meeting times when instructors and students are online at the same time, including video and audio simulcast.

**Telecourses** are essentially “College-by-Cassette” courses, which use videotaped lectures that students watch at home instead of attending the lectures on campus. (CD-Roms and DVDs are beginning to replace the cassette format.) Some courses are TV-based, which allows students who do not have access to a computer the opportunity to take a distance education course. Students are still expected to contact the instructor and usually meet with the instructor during the first week of class for an orientation.

**Videoconference Courses** are interactive classes where video and audio are transmitted simultaneously to people at different locations. Courses can be “point-to-point” where just two sites are connected, or they can be “multipoint,” connecting people located at several sites.

**Web Conference Courses** use a Web browser for visuals and an audioconference for discussion. To participate, students join a telephone conference call and log in to a pre-assigned Web site where only those who are logged in can share content and communicate with each other. This method allows for real-time communication, collaboration, and feedback.



## Distance Education Resources

**The North Carolina Community College System**  
[www.nccommunitycolleges.edu/Distance\\_Learning/](http://www.nccommunitycolleges.edu/Distance_Learning/)

This site connects you to all of the distance education options at NC Community Colleges. You can search for specific courses being offered in any distance education format at all of the schools and browse their individual virtual learning websites.

**The University of North Carolina**  
[www.northcarolina.edu/content.php/aa/distance/index.htm](http://www.northcarolina.edu/content.php/aa/distance/index.htm)

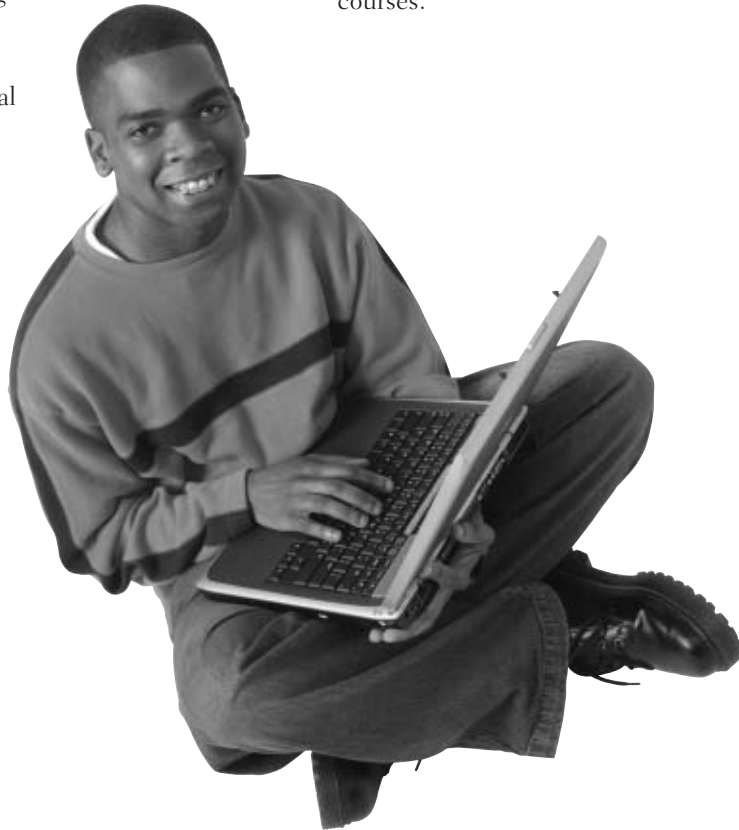
Learn more about the distance education options at the 16 UNC campuses. You can browse all the distance and e-learning programs currently being offered and those in development. There are also links to the distance education website at each individual campus.

**North Carolina Public Schools**  
[www.ncpublicschools.org/distancelearning](http://www.ncpublicschools.org/distancelearning)

Learn more about the distance education and professional development opportunities that the NC Department of Public Instruction offers to public high school students and K-12 educators.

**UNC-TV**  
[www.unctv.org/education/adultlearners](http://www.unctv.org/education/adultlearners)

Read various articles discussing distance education programs and related matters. Search for PBS courses that will help you earn college credit or a degree at a distance via video, CD-ROM, or the Internet, and find the schools in North Carolina that are offering those courses.



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