



Chapter XI

Distance Education Quality: Success Factors for Resources, Practices and Results

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INTRODUCTION

The current growth in distance education is a result of a convergence of factors. The delivery technology has become more affordable, available, familiar and interactive. With improvements in the technology, distance courses are now more realistic, engaging, inexpensive, and varied. The audience of learners is more experienced and capable with the technology, due to the increased availability of distance education, and they welcome distance learning into their busy lives. Technology-mediated distance education research has matured enough to produce an extensive body of evidence that distance education can be at least as effective as classroom instruction.

The exciting convergence that brought about the growth in distance education also presented distance learners with a challenge: how to choose the best distance learning opportunities from the vast catalog of options. Distance learners can easily compare the costs, technical needs, cognitive requirements, and time demands of distance learning courses. Learners are less well equipped to distinguish high quality courses from the offerings. Distance education programs have the responsibility of communicating to students the quality assurance measures they employ, whether the measures consist of in-house practices or accreditation by outside bodies.

This chapter describes trends that have led to the growth of distance education from elementary school through higher education and professional development. The following sections present critical success factors that institutions, course developers, instructors, and students have found through practice to lead to high quality distance education experiences. These guidelines are presented as they inform the three stages of the distance education development cycle: resources, practices, and results. In addition, two distance education programs are described as case illustrations that exemplify the successful application of success factors.

TRENDS CONTRIBUTING TO THE GROWTH OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

Distance education, as experienced via the Internet, is a result of the convergence of several recent trends. Access to the Internet is now available in some form to most Americans, and distance education is increasingly seen as a practical and effective pathway to learning. A growing concern among distance learners is determining the level of quality of distance education programs. This section examines the trends leading to the growth of distance education and the need for distance education quality assurance.

Interest in Distance Education

Interest in distance learning is on the rise among high school students, college students and professionals. A recent survey found that the majority of parents polled obtained Internet access for their children's education (Grunwald Associates, 2000), and as of the year 2000, a full 15% of U.S. high schools offered access to online classes (Market Data Retrieval, 2000). By the year 2002, over 2 million distance learning students are expected in higher education (Web-Based Education Commission, 2000). In a survey of working adults the majority stated that they believe college courses offered via the Internet are the future of higher education, with 32% expressing a preference for online courses over classroom learning, given equal quality of education (CyberAtlas, 2000). A survey of business managers who have used Internet-based training found that nearly 100% of respondents would recommend it, mainly because of "anytime, anywhere" access (CyberAtlas, 2000). While the expense of developing high-quality distance education materials can be high, return on investment analyses are beginning to show that training efficiency and resulting productivity gains make distance education worthwhile.

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