



**Chapter I**

**Distance Education:  
What Is It? Utilization of  
Distance Education in  
Higher Education in the  
United States**

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Technology-based distance education is emerging as an increasingly visible feature of post-secondary education in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Educators have the opportunity to define, design, and manage effective and robust teaching and learning systems, programs, and courses. As distance learning becomes a serious alternative to the standard classroom environment, enormous opportunities and dilemmas present themselves for the players. This chapter examines the technology used in distance education; the type of student utilizing distance education; advantages and disadvantages for the student, the instructor, and the institution in the use of distance education; and the players involved—including higher education institutions, virtual universities, states, and consortia.

## INTRODUCTION

Technology-based distance education is emerging as an increasingly visible feature of post-secondary education in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Technology is changing the way the university functions as an institution of higher learning. Publications such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education* regularly feature articles about the distance education efforts of various higher education institutions and systems, states, and consortia. Distance education specialists and academic policymakers expect technology to help higher education institutions provide a wide range of programs, including degree programs, to larger proportions of the student population (U.S. Department of Education, 1997).

In distance education, or distance learning, the students and instructors remain geographically apart. Today, the ability to take courses from a remote location utilizing the Internet is referred to as “e-learning” (Quan, 2000); e-learning is the dot-com term for distance education. Concepts of lifelong learning, individualized or personalized learning, and time-free, space-free, “just-in-time” learning arrangements have emerged, all of which allow learning away from the traditional campus (American Council on Education, 1996). Distance education is a key strategy in meeting the massive demand for higher education.

Distance education is first and foremost a movement that sought not so much to challenge or change the structure of higher learning, but to extend the traditional university in order to overcome its inherent problems of scarcity and exclusivity. Second, distance education developed as a creative political response to the increasing inability of the traditional university structure to grow bigger (Hall, J., 1995). Distance education dealt with the problem of too many students in a single physical space.

The increasing diversity in demand for education means the virtual campus is a model for the future. Developed societies are moving further from the traditional model, where people complete their education at an early age and then dedicate themselves solely to work (Warden, 1995). Simple desktop computers can now function on the Internet as powerful, multimedia, interactive communication centers. New Internet tools, such as bulletin boards, electronic tests, hyper-linked texts and sources, and enhanced computer systems with greater speed and more memory, allow viewers to see more information and tune in on discussions, meetings, theatrical performances, even operas, around the world (Gallick, 1998). Such features offer rich opportunities for distance education.

Distance learning is emerging as part of mainstream education (American Council on Education, 1996). So, “What is distance education and

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