

Distance Learning

With the growth of technology like the Internet and the need for more highly skilled workers, distance learning has become a great alternative to the traditional classroom setting for many people. High school students as well as working adults are taking part in distance learning. In fact, the U.S. Department of Education and National Center for Education Statistics reported that nationally over half (56 percent) of

two-year and four-year colleges were offering distance learning options and 12 percent planned to start offering distance learning programs by the time this publication will be made available. In North Carolina, nearly 500 high schools are participating in distance learning programs, with around 80 percent of high schools enrolled in The North Carolina Virtual School.



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What is Distance Learning?

Distance learning usually means that there is a separation between the student and the primary or main campus offering courses. Students may also be separated from the instructor and the other students in the class. There are different methods of distance learning. Some schools may use one method; some may use all of them. If you are considering a distance learning program, be sure to research institutions to find out what they have to offer. For example, some colleges offer classes at a satellite campus closer to you, yet miles away from their main campus, while other colleges offer online or televised classes. You might even find some combination of online and traditional methods within one class. (See “Types of Distance Learning” on the back page of this publication for a comprehensive list of choices.)

What Are the Benefits?

Distance learning provides flexibility for working professionals, parents, high school students, and anyone with time or physical constraints. Some programs allow students to work at their own pace and from the comfort of their own home during times that are convenient to them. For example, a high school student may take distance learning courses during the school day in conjunction with his or her regular course work (depending on the program) and still have access to their distance courses 24 hours a day. An adult student may have even more flexibility.

In some cases, distance learning can be more cost-effective than traditional classroom instruction. It can save commuting time, transportation costs, and child care expenses, among others. In fact, the Learn and Earn program allows students to attend a high school located on a college campus and within five years earn a high school diploma and two years of college credit or even an associate’s degree, at no cost.

Most importantly, distance learning provides the chance to study to some people who otherwise may not have the opportunity.

Who Should Consider Distance Learning?

Distance learning may seem appealing, but it is not for everyone. To be successful in a distance education degree program or class, students need to be self-disciplined and have good computer skills. One might consider taking a basic computer skills class before enrolling in a distance learning program.

Some students who enjoy the social aspect of traditional classroom learning may miss the face-to-face interaction. In addition, distance learning may be more demanding than traditional classroom interaction since electronic communication can be less clear at times. The student may need to ask the instructor more questions for clarification.

How Do You Select a Distance Learning Undergraduate or Graduate Program?

There are many things to consider when selecting a distance learning program. You might think about the type of distance learning opportunities you would like and how much of the program you would want to complete online or in some other format. You should also think about the kind of institution you want to attend and if it has the program in which you are interested. You may prefer to attend a traditional college or university that has distance learning as an option.

Traditional vs. Virtual Colleges and Universities

Many nationally known virtual colleges are for-profit, meaning they are businesses that make money from tuition and fees. North Carolina Community Colleges, the 16 UNC Campuses including UNCG iSchool and the North Carolina School of Science and Math, and the North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities are nonprofit schools.

Another difference between traditional and virtual universities is the admissions 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 the Test of English as a Foreign Language (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 the program, students may have to submit letters of recommendation.



When considering any school, make sure it is accredited by a regional accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. 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 degree be recognized by most institutions and employers across the U.S. In addition, students must attend an eligible school to be considered for federal financial aid (eligibility as defined for the Title IV funding of the Higher Education Act of 1965 as amended). Students who attend schools that are not accredited are not eligible for state financial aid. When looking at virtual colleges and universities, ask if they are accredited by one of the following agencies:

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

When considering a program at a virtual university, also 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 somewhere across the U.S. These trips can range from a day to a week, depending on the program.

More on Distance Learning in High School

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) offers online, videoconferencing, and televised college-level courses at no direct cost to students or to schools. These distance learning options allow students to take high school courses and earn college credits or both, making students more competitive in applying for college or in the workplace.

These are the distance learning programs currently available in North Carolina:

- North Carolina Virtual Public School (NCVPS) for high school courses not offered at the student's school
- Learn & Earn Online courses available through the NC Community College System to earn both high school and college "dual credit" during the regular school day
- Learn & Earn Online through UNCG iSchool, another way for high school students to earn college credits while still in high school

School administrators or counselors select the courses their schools will offer. For the Learn & Earn Online program, facilitators are assigned to troubleshoot equipment problems, act as a liaison between the students and the instructors, and help keep students on task. Students are able to register for online courses during their regular registration time and are scheduled to be in a computer lab with a facilitator during the instructional day. Before enrolling, students may be asked to complete a questionnaire to determine if distance learning is right for them. Students interested in taking online courses should first consult with their school counselor. (See "Distance Learning Resources" on the back page for more information on distance learning for high school students and adults.)

Types of Distance Learning

Online Courses and Degree Programs are completed over the Internet. Some courses may require students to make campus visits for proctored testing or lab assignments. Other courses may have scheduled meeting times when instructors and students are online at the same time, while others can be more flexible and can be completed at an individual student's pace.

Interactive Video Conferencing 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 "multipoint" where people are located at several sites. These classes use the North Carolina Information Highway (NCIH) or local data lines to allow students to interact with one another from across the state.

Telecourses for College Credits is a service that broadcasts NC college classes over the television on UNC-TV. Selected colleges have these telecourses available via broadband in a videostreaming format accessible by computer. Courses are broadcast on a semester basis.

Web Conference or Web-Enhanced Courses use a web browser or programs like Blackboard for visuals and audioconferencing for discussion. To participate, students may join a telephone conference call or simply log into a pre-assigned website 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.

Satellite or Extension Courses are classes or programs of study taught away from the main campus. For example, some four-year colleges and universities offer courses or degree programs at two-year community college campuses and at other off-campus sites to serve students who are unable to travel to the main campus. In addition, some two-year community colleges have satellite campuses in local community centers or other facilities to serve even more students in their community.

Correspondence or CD/DVD Courses are conducted by mail, e-mail, or fax using print materials or CD/DVDs. Students are expected to remain in contact with the instructor and usually meet in person during the first week of class for orientation.

Distance Learning Resources for North Carolina

The North Carolina Community College System has a Virtual Learning Community that provides information about all of the distance learning opportunities at the 58 community colleges across the state. You can search for courses and degree programs at <http://vlc.nccommunitycolleges.edu>.

The University of North Carolina System created a web portal called The University of North Carolina Online where students can learn about the online courses and degree programs at the 16 UNC campuses across the state and the North Carolina School of Science and Math. To access this site, go to www.online.northcarolina.edu.

North Carolina's Independent Colleges and Universities have information about their adult degree programs offered online or at satellite campuses during evenings or weekends at www.ncicu.org/adults.html.

NCDPI has distance learning offerings to public high school students, including UNCG iSchool, and professional development opportunities for K-12 educators at www.ncpublicschools.org/distancelearning. Two other helpful resources are the NCVPS website at www.ncvps.org and the Learn & Earn Online website at www.ncpublicschools.org/learnandearnonline.

UNC-TV lists all of their telecourses for college credits, as well as information on educational services for teachers and childcare providers, including lesson plans and activities, at www.unctv.org/education/tvforlearning/telecourse/index.html. To learn more about the award-winning TeacherLine program at UNC-TV, go to www.unctv.org/education/teacherline.

How Do You Pay for These Programs?

You may be able to use funding received for traditional institutions to pay for distance learning programs. Check with the financial aid office at the school offering the course to find out whether you can receive financial aid. As with traditional on-site courses, tuition costs will vary by institution. There may also be required books and certain computer specifications associated with a course.