

DISTANCE EDUCATION BACKGROUND



Even before the COVID-19 pandemic made distance education the new normal, it was steadily becoming more common. Today's students—many of whom work while in college, are financially independent, or have children of their own—need access to a college education off-campus to pursue higher education in a format that works for them. But there are still many barriers that stand in the way of a more widely used distance education system. Policymakers must address the inequity of internet and technology access.

WHAT IS DISTANCE EDUCATION?



Distance education is education that uses technology (such as the internet) to deliver instruction to students who are physically separated from the instructor.

The most common form of distance education is instruction provided through the internet. This includes watching lectures online (either live or pre-recorded), participating in online discussions, and submitting assignments digitally. Distance education can be utilized as part of a degree or certificate program, and even students attending classes in person or living on campus often supplement their learning with some form of distance education.

Fifty percent of postsecondary students report that existing commitments, including work and family obligations, prevent them from getting their education in an on-campus environment.¹ Because of campus closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, 29 percent of students have reported that they received their instruction fully online in Fall 2020, with a majority of students (57 percent) stating that they received instruction through a "hybrid model"—partially online, partially offline.² This trend will likely continue into Spring 2021 as the pandemic continues. For these students, distance learning opportunities can allow them to pursue their education and succeed in the job market.

FEDERAL POLICY'S IMPACT ON DISTANCE EDUCATION



In 1999, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) first implemented the Distance Education Demonstration Program. The program supported the use of technology to deliver postsecondary education and was aimed at increasing students' access to postsecondary education by allowing students to use federal student aid to pay for distance education programs.

Before 2005, colleges that were participating in federal student aid programs had to abide by the “50 percent rule”—meaning they could not offer more than 50 percent of their courses and/or have more than 50 percent of their students learning via distance education. The rule was repealed in 2005.

Today, law and regulations require colleges and universities participating in federal student aid programs to first be approved by ED and their accreditor before they can offer programs via distance education. This requirement is applicable when an institution offers a program in which at least 50 percent of its courses are offered through distance education. Accreditors establish their own criteria as part of these evaluations.

After restrictions on physical classroom-based learning related to COVID-19 were put into place in March 2020, ED waived these requirements under authority provided to the agency through the Higher Education Relief Opportunities for Students Act (HEROES Act) of 2003. The waiver temporarily removing these requirements is currently permitted by ED through the end of this calendar year (December 31, 2020).

In August 2020, while the pandemic continued, ED finalized regulations with respect to distance education that will impact how programs are offered through this medium for years to come. The rule maintains the concept that students in distance education must have “regular and substantive interaction” with their instructors and specifically defines what that interaction looks like.³ Under the rule, ED must only approve an IHE’s first direct assessment program at each credential level (i.e. undergraduate). However, IHEs must report to ED when adding a second or subsequent program. The rule also requires ED to expedite the application process for institutions seeking determinations as eligible institutions.

TODAY’S STUDENTS AND DISTANCE EDUCATION



Before the pandemic, nearly seven million students were enrolled in distance education courses at colleges and universities, with half of these students taking all of their coursework online.⁴ Now, months into the pandemic, most postsecondary students are taking some or all their courses online. Many students who expected to be educated in an on-campus environment experienced their first online postsecondary class last spring, over the summer, or during this current fall term. This has fundamentally changed the postsecondary experience for nearly all students.

Although distance education is a promising tool to make higher education more accessible to all students, regardless of their physical distance from campus or other responsibilities that might keep them from attending in person, there are still barriers to address. Not all students have access to high-speed, affordable internet, WiFi-connected devices, or a quiet place to focus and learn at home. Lower-income Americans and those living in rural areas or on tribal lands are more likely to lack internet access at home, which is essential to participating in distance education, than higher-income Americans and those living in urban areas. A survey commissioned by Higher Learning Advocates also found that Latinx and Black college students were more likely than their white peers to rely on mobile data alone to access course materials, which caused them to have difficulty accessing course content.⁵ The quick shift to online learning due to the pandemic has highlighted these inequalities, and many students—including those who expected to be learning in person—are struggling.

POLICY CHANGE FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION



While distance education is a powerful tool that lets many more students, especially those with work and family commitments, participate in higher education, oversight and planning to ensure its success is vital. Now, with the quick and widespread shift to distance education that the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated, the administration, policymakers, and institutions have an opportunity to navigate this new normal with today's students' needs at the center.

The pandemic highlighted two major issues related to distance education that can be addressed through policy change.

1

First, the requirements and systems currently in place to approve institutions to offer distance education programs could not process the number of institutions that rapidly needed to adopt online learning. By requiring all colleges and universities operating under the current waivers to have a date set by which they will meet all pre-pandemic requirements to offer distance education programs, ED can help ensure that online programs remain accountable during the crisis.

2

Second, the widespread shift to distance education this past spring highlighted inequities that prevent some students from succeeding when learning online due to lack of technology and internet access. Policymakers must respond by creating a fund, like E-rate, for postsecondary education students that supplies Wi-Fi-devices and hotspots to students that need reliable internet access. Ensuring that low-income families and those with a household member receiving a Pell Grant can purchase high-speed, home-based internet access at a subsidized rate means no natural disaster or future health emergency would leave students without the technological access to learn.

ENDNOTES

¹ Best Colleges, "2017 Online Education Trends Report." <https://res.cloudinary.com/highereducation/image/upload/v1/BestColleges.com/2017-Online-Education-Trends-Report.pdf>.

² Fishman, Rachel, and Hiler, Tamara. Third Way. "New Polling from New America & Third Way on COVID-19's Impact on Current and Future College Students." 22 September, 2020. <https://www.thirdway.org/memo/new-polling-from-new-america-third-way-on-covid-19s-impact-on-current-and-future-college-students>.

³ Federal Register, September 2, 2020.

⁴ Fast Facts: Distance learning (80). National Center for Education Statistics, <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=80>.

⁵ Clark, Ashley. Higher Learning Advocates. "Survey Reveals Higher Ed Students Have Inequitable Access to Reliable Broadband." May 2020. <https://medium.com/higher-learning-advocates/survey-reveals-higher-ed-students-have-inequitable-access-to-reliable-broadband-ab3cc152d663>.