College from a Distance: Could It Be a Good Option for You?
Sharon R. O'Boyle
July 21, 2020

Introduction

Over the past several months, distance learning has become a very hot topic. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated risks of gathering in large groups, education at all levels has seen a massive shift from in-person to distance learning. Much of this recent attention has been negative, from parents of elementary students complaining that their children are not learning anything to university students demanding a tuition refund. But these negative reactions have largely resulted from the unexpected and unplanned switch from classroom to distance learning. Many colleges and universities offer distance learning courses as part of their regular curriculum. When such programs are well-planned and well-executed, they can be a wonderful opportunity for many students.

History of Distance Learning

According to Britannica.com, distance learning is "a form of education in which the main elements include physical separation of teachers and students during instruction and the use of various technologies to facilitate student-teacher and student-student communication" (Simonson, 2016, para. 1). Many people assume that distance learning is something relatively new, made possible because of the internet. But distance learning has been around for a long time, close to 200 years!

In 1840, Englishman Isaac Pitman offered the world's first official distance learning course–a correspondence course in shorthand (a method of writing very quickly by using symbols and codes). This marked the beginning of the First Generation of distance learning. In this First Generation, courses exchanged printed material via postal services. Soon schools in Europe were offering correspondence courses in various subjects (Sumner, 2010). In 1858, the University of London became the first university in the world to offer degrees entirely through distance learning. In the United States, the first formal correspondence schools began in 1873, and the University of Chicago offered the first university correspondence course in 1892 (Ferrer, 2019).

The 1900s brought the Second Generation of distance learning. This phase added broadcast media and recorded audio and video content to the distance learning options (Sumner, 2010). In 1906, the University of Wisconsin–Madison created lectures on phonograph records. In 1922, Pennsylvania State University became the first university to broadcast courses over the radio, followed by the University of Houston offering courses via television in 1953 (Ferrer, 2019). Videotapes soon became a popular mode of distance learning (Sumner, 2010).

We are now experiencing the Third Generation–one in which distance learning is increasing dramatically because of advances in computer and internet technology (Sumner, 2010). Post-secondary institutions are taking advantage of these opportunities. Online programs began in the 1980s (Ferrer, 2019). By 2002 there were 1.6 million post-secondary students taking at least one online class (Allen & Seaman, 2014). In fall 2018, in degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the U.S, there were 6.9 million students (35% of total students) enrolled in at least

one distance education course. Of those, 17% were enrolled exclusively in distance learning (NCES, n.d.)!

Synchronous Versus Asynchronous Learning

One important consideration for a distance learning program is whether it is synchronous or asynchronous. The word synchronous means "occurring at the same time." With synchronous learning, there are scheduled class times, and all students meet at those times. Using today's technology, a synchronous class can closely resemble an in-person lecture class. The students and instructor can see and interact with each other; class members can share their work on the screen; the instructor can use a white board and other academic tools; and class members can break into small groups for discussions.

In contrast, asynchronous learning does not include scheduled class meetings, and students are not required to perform their class responsibilities at any designated time. Within the asynchronous learning model, the course can be either scheduled or learn-at-your-own-pace. With a scheduled course, students have assigned dates for the coursework to be completed and submitted. For example, work might be assigned on Monday morning and due by 11:59 p.m. the following Sunday. On the other hand, learn-at-your-own-pace courses allow more flexibility. For example, there may be only a final course deadline, and the student need only complete all the work by that deadline. The Affordable Colleges Online website provides more information about self-paced learning and gives examples of some programs that are self-paced (Affordable Colleges Online Self-Paced Programs).

Benefits of Distance Learning

So why choose to take a distance learning course? Well, convenience is one reason. Eliminating the time and expense needed to commute to a physical campus is a welcome aspect of distance learning. In addition, some students prefer learning from the comfort of their own home rather than a crowded classroom. More importantly, the flexibility offered by distance learning, especially asynchronous classes, makes learning possible for many students who could not otherwise attend scheduled on-campus classes. For example, students who do not live near a school, students who have jobs, or students who have family obligations could find attending traditional on-campus classes to be very difficult.

Distance learning can also be advantageous for non-traditional learners. For instance, students with attention or language issues might struggle through a lengthy classroom lecture and become frustrated with the learning process. Having options to study in shorter sessions and use multiple learning resources (videos, interactive activities, etc.) might help the learner absorb more of the information. And some students who lack the confidence to speak up during in-person classes can thrive in a less threatening online format.

Drawbacks of Distance Learning

Although there are many appealing aspects to distance learning, there are also some drawbacks. Since today's distance learning relies heavily on technology, the student must have access to that technology. And a technologic failure could bring the student's leaning to a crashing halt. In addition, distance learning requires strong motivation, self-discipline and time management skills. Students who lack these skills might find themselves failing to complete the required assignments. Also, there are some types of courses that are less enriching if they occur

at a distance. For example, a biology laboratory session and a modern dance class would likely be more effective in a lab and a dance studio, respectively.

Cautions

Unfortunately, there are some providers of online education who are not legitimate, and if students are not careful, they might invest substantial time, money and energy into a program that will have very little value. Also, some schools and/or programs will not be eligible for federal financial aid. Before selecting a program, students should check that the school/program is accredited and eligible for federal financial aid. The federal government ([Federal Student Aid: Choosing Schools](#)) and The Best Schools website ([Best Schools Financial Aid for Online College](#)) offer more information about this important aspect of distance learning.

Resources

With many traditional 4-year institutions and community colleges offering distance learning, and with many fully online institutions being available, the options can seem overwhelming. Fortunately, there are many resources available to help prospective students explore online options. The College Board website is a great place to explore online options. Their search feature ([College Board-Big Future: College Search](#)) allows users to filter for online programs as well as many other features (location, public vs. private, 4-year vs. 2-year, etc.). Both U.S. News ([U.S. News-The Best Accredited Online Colleges of 2020](#)) and Best Colleges ([Best Colleges-Top Online Schools](#)) publish rankings and detailed advice for prospective online learners.

Conclusion

Because of the ongoing pandemic, many U.S. colleges and universities will provide all or most of their courses online this fall. Because they are investing significant resources in online learning, and because many students and faculty are finding that distance learning is a valid option, it is possible that distance learning will become even more popular in the near future. Distance learning can be a great option for many students. But if you are considering this option, it is important that you do adequate research beforehand to determine (1) if you are a good candidate for distance learning and (2) if the program is legitimate and will provide good value. If you want to try a distance learning college course, many colleges offer free non-credit online classes ([Edukatico-MOOC Courses](#)). You might find it worthwhile to give one a try to see if distance learning is right for you!

References

Affordable Colleges Online. (2019). *35 self-paced online college degrees & programs*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from https://www.affordablecollegesonline.org/college-resource-center/self-paced-online-college/

Allen, I. E. & Seaman, J. (2014). *Grade change – Tracking online education in the United States*. [PDF file]. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from http://www.onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/gradechange.pdf

Best Colleges. (2020). *The best online colleges & universities of 2020*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from https://www.bestcolleges.com/features/top-online-schools/

Best Schools. (2020, March 23). *Financial aid for online college: Everything you need to know and do*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from https://thebestschools.org/financial-aid/online-college-students/

College Board. (n.d.). *Big future: College search*. (Retrieved July 21, 2020, from https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/college-search

Edukatico. (n.d.). *MOOC courses: Search thousands of courses from top universities*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from https://www.edukatico.org/en/report/mooc-courses-search-thousands-of-courses-from-top-universities

Federal Student Aid. (n.d.). *Not sure what college or career school might be right for you?* Retrieved July 21, 2020, from https://studentaid.gov/resources/prepare-for-college/students/choosing-schools

Ferrer, D. (2019, July 17). *History of online education*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from https://thebestschools.org/magazine/online-education-history/

NCES. (2019). *Fast facts*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=80

Simonson, M. (2016, November 07). *Distance learning*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from https://www.britannica.com/topic/distance-learning

Sumner, J. (2010). Serving the system: A critical history of distance education. *Open Learning*, *15*(3), 267–285. https://doi.org/10.1080/713688409

U.S. News. (n.d.). *The best accredited online colleges of 2020*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from https://www.usnews.com/education/online-education