

## A Few Common Misconceptions about Distance Learning

**Laurie G. Hillstock**  
**Clemson University**  
**439 Brackett Hall**  
**Clemson, SC 29634**  
**864-650-5438**  
**laurieh@clemson.edu**

At present, with new technologies emerging daily and the growing need for more flexibility in scheduling, there seems to be an overall drive towards the need for distance learning. According to PBS Campus, 67% of colleges and universities agree that online education is a critical, long-term strategy for their institution. As a result, 49% of public colleges and universities and 34% of all higher education institutions offer complete online degree programs (PBS Campus, 2004). In addition, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, “in the 12-month 2000–2001 academic year, there were an estimated 3,077,000 enrollments in all distance education courses offered by 2-year and 4-year institutions. There were an estimated 2,876,000 enrollments in college-level, credit-granting distance education courses, with 82 percent of these at the undergraduate level (*see Appendix A for tables*)” (Waits & Lewis, 2003, p. 1).

The fundamental premise of distance learning was to create and widen access to education and to improve its quality, using distance education techniques and associated technologies to meet the particular requirements of individuals who were unable to participate in the traditional classroom environment.

The purpose of this paper is to explore factors related to common misconceptions about distance learning, including: faculty preparation time, effective use of appropriate technology, learning styles of students, the need for orientation, training and support, and cost.

Most are familiar with the traditional, face-to-face classroom environment, where there is synchronous (or real-time) communication between the instructor and student. The instructor usually serves as the leader, responsible for the class goals, objectives and methods of evaluation. Instructors also make use of a whiteboard (or chalkboard), overhead projector, handouts, and open class discussions.

However, the distance learning environment is somewhat different. According to the American Society for Training and Development, Distance learning (also called Distance Education), is an “educational situation in which the instructor and students are separated by time, location, or both. Education or training courses are delivered to remote locations via synchronous or asynchronous (happening with a time-delay) means of instruction, including written correspondence, text, graphics, audio- and videotape, CD-ROM, online learning, audio- and videoconferencing, interactive TV, and FAX.” (Kaplan-Leiserson). With this in mind, faculty and students have to make some adjustments to ensure the success of a distance learning environment.

One factor is related the amount of time faculty members actually spend preparing to teach a distance education course. A common misconception is that courses of this nature are easier for faculty, because of the increased responsibility placed on the student. However, these courses

require a great deal of development and preparation time on the part of the faculty member. Alford and Engelland suggest a strong need for faculty training before course preparation and delivery. "As a result of training, instructors learn that they may have to change their standard teaching approach. Instead of the 'sage on stage' approach used in more traditional education, they likely must become more like a 'guide on the side'" (Alford & Engelland, 2001, p. 1). It is vital for faculty to consider activities to engage students and a contingency plan in case the lines of communication are broken and the technology being used does not function as expected.

In addition, it is important for faculty to consider their content and the type of technology being used. According to the Center for IT Accommodation, section 508 requires that federal agencies give disabled persons information that is comparable to the access available to others. Since most colleges and universities received some form of aid from the federal government, they must comply with section 508 standards. Therefore, faculty may have to modify (or in some cases, totally restructure) their course materials. In addition, all technologies do not meet section 508 standards, causing faculty to make additional accommodations for students (i.e., changing the type of technology used, offering a text only version of course website, allowing more time on exams, etc...).

Finally, students participating in distance education courses usually expect fast responses from faculty, much faster than the traditional learning environment. The general thought is that faculty are available 24hours a day, seven days a week to provide feedback on student assignments and to offer some level technical support for students. This level of communication places a high demand on faculty time, more so than in the traditional classroom. Therefore, many faculty members find themselves relying heavily on email or using a course management system to facilitate class discussions (via discussion board or chat room), generate and grade assignments, and post lecture notes (usually PowerPoint files), study guides, study guides, and additional resources (web links, etc...). With this in mind, faculty members discover that additional time is spent on learning how to use the system (or technologies) properly, determining which tools/resources will work best for their content, developing online assessments (quizzes, tests, and/or surveys), and converting files to appropriate format(s).

A study was conducted at a large, mid-Western university, to measure the effects of teaching in a distance learning environment had on a faculty member's time and teaching. The results revealed that 50% of the faculty surveyed reported having to spend more than 30hours extra time preparing for the semester due to the technology. In addition, even though preparation time needed declined over time, the study showed that 37% of the faculty reported spending more than ten hours of time on hardware/software training alone ((Pachnowski & Jurczyk, 2003, p 1-8). Even though some colleges and universities provide funding for course development, it does not necessarily equate to the amount of time needed to properly plan, develop, and implement a successful distance education course (or program). In addition, due to budget constraints, many colleges are no longer able to offer faculty members stipends or other types of funding.

Another factor to consider is the effective use of appropriate technology. The common misconception is that distance education equals the use of a particular type of technology, namely the Internet. This leads many to believing that by making materials available to students online, the job is done. However, according to Rossen, "access to data does not automatically expand stu-

dent's knowledge; the availability of information does not intrinsically create a framework of ideas" (Rossen, para. 3). Granted, faculty should learn the technology and gain a complete understanding of its strengths and weaknesses, but concentrate on the education. In general, the technology used should be supplemental to the classroom as a means of enhancing learning. It should be fairly transparent to the student. In other words, at the end of the day, discussions should be centered on the actual course content, instead of the technology used for delivery. Therefore, faculty should make sure participants are comfortable with the technology at the beginning of the course or program so that they can concentrate on the actual learning process.

Porto and Aje's research focused on factors relating to the decision-making process during curriculum, course development and delivery of online courses. They referenced Bates' 'Lone Ranger and Tonto's model, dealing mostly with the technology and the need for faculty to understand the overall potential of the technology without losing focus of their classroom goals. The authors note that because there is a variety of technologies available for use with online courses (video IP, audio/video conferencing, internet, audio-graphics, etc...), it is important that decision makers include definitions, limitations, and cost for the various medias in the decision-making process (Porto & Aje, 2004, 1). Therefore, many schools are finding the need to employ instructional designers and instructional technologist, those individuals responsible for assisting faculty by reviewing course content and applying the appropriate tools and technology to enhance the learning experience. These individuals may serve as a consultant, web developer, technical writer, and/or a researcher. They help faculty find innovative ways to involve students at a distance.

A third factor to consider involves the various learning styles of students. The misconception here is usually on the part of the student. The general thought is that the class will be easier, because they can work at their own pace. In addition, the workload will be lighter so they will not have to work as hard. However, Forbes estimates the online student dropout rate at around 35% while the average attrition rate for college freshman at U.S. universities is around 20%. This is in part due to the fact that it takes much more discipline on the part of the student to be successful in a distance education course and the work load is usually heavier than in a traditional classroom.

Although there are many online resources that try to help students determine if distance education right for them, they all agree that students must first address the issue of how they learn most effectively. Students need to consider characteristics of each type of learner: visual, auditory and kinesthetic. Visual learners learn through seeing, auditor learners learn through listening and kinesthetic learners learn through moving, doing and touching. With this in mind, students are able to determine best ways to prepare for synchronous (i.e., chat) or asynchronous (i.e., discussion board) class discussions, quizzes, and exams.

In addition to the traditional learning styles, most agree that all distance learning students need to be self-directed learners, in that they have to take responsibility for their own actions. A study conducted to compare the learning of two online health education classes with an on-campus face-to-face class at a community college revealed that students enrolled in the online class were more independent in their styles of learning than those enrolled in the on-campus class. According to the study, "the on-campus students seemed to match the profile of traditional students who are willing to work in class provided they can obtain rewards for working with others, and for

meeting teacher expectations. Online students appeared to be driven more by intrinsic motives and clearly not by the reward structure of the class” (Diaz & Cartnal, 1999, 130-135).

The advantages of self-directed learning include: immediate feedback, learners work at own pace, individual choice of material and method, and reduced cost. However, some of the disadvantages include the need for more learner preparation. This raises a major issue in that all learners are not comfortable with being “left on their own”.

A final factor to consider is cost. The misconception is that distance learning is a way to save money. Most administrators see distance learning as a way of bringing in more money without spending more in resources (in terms of faculty and facilities). Unfortunately, studies have shown otherwise. Distance education is more expensive to set up and if implemented properly, the student/teacher ratio will actually be smaller than that of the traditional classroom (averaging a ratio of one to twenty-five). Administrators have to carefully consider the cost of development, training, support and technologies and weigh them against the outcomes.

For example, a substantial amount of additional time may be needed for faculty to properly prepare for a distance education course. The cost of that time should be taken under consideration. As mentioned in the study cited earlier, faculty spent more than 30 hours preparing for a distance education course due to technology. Due to the additional preparation time needed, some institutions are offering faculty stipends ranging from \$1,000-\$5,000 per course. In addition, many institutions are employing instructional designers and technologists to assist faculty with course development, support and training. The cost of hiring additional staff must be considered. According to Pay Scale, the median salary of an instructional designer at a college or university in the U.S. is \$42,000.

Also, the need for various technologies must be considered. Those institutions implementing satellite communication need to consider the cost of having a coordinator (or technician) available at each remote site and the main campus, “air time”, telephone/fax usage and contractual fees paid to remote location. For example, four-year institutions pay \$25 per hour of use for satellite air time.

The institutions that choose to use a course management system need to consider the cost of servers, possible changes to the network infrastructure, support personnel, and software cost. For example, Blackboard and WebCT are the two most leading course management systems today. The average software cost of these packages for some institutions is over \$100,000 per year.

Those institutions making use of video tapes, CD’s and/or DVD’s, need to consider the cost of mailings, actual media, and hardware/software needed to create the content placed on the media. For example, the average cost of a CD/DVD burner with the ability to burn 119 CD-R’s or 28 DVD-R’s per hour is \$2,500. In addition, the average cost of the media ranges from one to two dollars each, depending on type.

In summation, there are several common misconceptions about the distance learning environment, including: faculty preparation time, effective use of appropriate technology, learning styles

of students, the need for orientation, training and support, and cost. These myths tend to lead the administration, faculty and students into danger when determining if distance learning is right for them and their respective institution. However, a successful course is good, because it is well designed. A distance learning course can be just as successful as a face-to-face class, as long as all involved spend the necessary time to prepare, use technology appropriately, become aware of the various learning styles, and have resources in place to properly support the programs.

## Appendix A

**Table 4. Number of 2-year and 4-year Title IV degree-granting institutions that offered distance education courses, total enrollment in all distance education courses, and enrollment in college-level, credit-granting distance education courses, by institutional type and size: 2000–2001**

Institutional type and size	Total number of institutions	Number of institutions that offered distance education courses	Total number of enrollments in all distance education courses	Number of enrollments in college-level, credit-granting distance education courses		
				Enrollment in courses at both levels	Enrollments in undergraduate courses	Enrollments in graduate first-professional course
All institutions.....	4,130	2,320	3,077,000	2,876,000	2,350,000	510,000
<b>Institutional type<sup>1</sup></b>						
Public 2-year.....	1,070	960	1,472,000	1,436,000	1,435,000	4 <sup>2</sup>
Public 4-year.....	620	550	945,000	888,000	566,000	308,000
Private 4-year.....	1,800	710	589,000	480,000	278,000	202,000
<b>Size of institution</b>						
Less than 3,000.....	2,840	1,160	486,000	460,000	368,000	91,000
3,000 to 9,999.....	870	770	1,171,000	1,132,000	932,000	197,000
10,000 or more.....	420	400	1,420,000	1,284,000	1,049,000	222,000

<sup>1</sup>Reporting standards not met.

<sup>2</sup>Data for private 2-year institutions are not reported in a separate category because too few private 2-year institutions in the sample offered distance education courses in 2000–2001 to make reliable estimates. Data for private 2-year institutions are included in the totals and in analyses by other institutional characteristics.

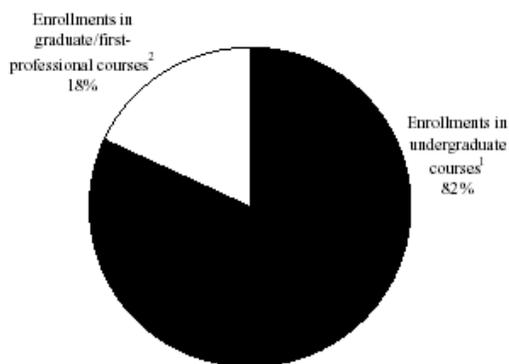
<sup>3</sup>Two-year branches of public 4-year institutions occasionally offer graduate/first-professional level courses.

NOTE: Enrollments may include duplicated counts of students, since institutions were instructed to count a student enrolled in multiple courses for each course in which he or she was enrolled. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding, missing data, or because too few cases were reported for a reliable estimate for private 2-year institutions. (See appendix A for details.)

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Postsecondary Education Quick Information System, "Survey on Distance Education at Higher Education Institutions, 2000–2001," 2002.

**Figure 1 – (Waits, T. & Lewis, L., 2003)**

**Figure 2. Percentage distribution of enrollment in college-level, credit-granting distance education courses in 2-year and 4-year Title IV degree-granting institutions, by level of course offerings: 2000–2001**



<sup>1</sup>Percent based on the 2,350,000 enrollments in undergraduate distance education courses out of 2,876,000 total enrollments in college-level, credit-granting distance education courses.

<sup>2</sup>Percent based on the 510,000 enrollments in graduate/first-professional distance education courses out of 2,876,000 total enrollments in college-level, credit-granting distance education courses.

NOTE: Enrollments may include duplicated counts of students, since institutions were instructed to count a student enrolled in multiple courses for each course in which he or she was enrolled. Figure derived from data in table 4. Enrollments in undergraduate and graduate/first-professional distance education courses do not sum to the total enrollment because of rounding and missing data. (See appendix A for details.)

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Postsecondary Education Quick Information System, "Survey on Distance Education at Higher Education Institutions, 2000–2001," 2002.

**Figure 2 – (Waits, T. & Lewis, L., 2003)**

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