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TITLE Distance Learning and Adults with Disabilities.  
INSTITUTION American Council on Education, Washington, DC. HEATH  
Resource Center.  
SPONS AGENCY Department of Education, Washington, DC.  
PUB DATE Jul 93  
CONTRACT H030C00001-92  
NOTE 7p.  
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS Adults; Correspondence Schools; \*Disabilities;  
\*Distance Education; Educational Opportunities;  
Educational Technology; Enrollment; External Degree  
Programs; Higher Education; Nontraditional Education;  
Teaching Methods

## ABSTRACT

This resource paper is intended to assist students with disabilities who wish to enroll in postsecondary education via distance learning opportunities. It describes the process of enrolling in a distance learning program (including selecting a program and obtaining financial aid); means of earning credit toward a degree (such as proficiency examinations and portfolio assessment); methods of instruction (including computer conferencing, cable television, interactive telephone, videocassettes, and correspondence courses); and access to student services. A list of printed and organizational resources concludes the paper. (DB)

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# HEATH Resource Center

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## DISTANCE LEARNING AND ADULTS WITH DISABILITIES

Off-campus education, or distance learning, is a teaching and learning strategy which is becoming increasingly popular in the adult/higher education community. In order to reach the growing number of non-traditional students (those who are other than 18-23 years old embarking on postsecondary education directly from high school) some postsecondary institutions have become decentralized, having campuses in several locations. A result of decentralization is that education can be available to those unable to attend classes during the day or on a specific campus due to work, family, or other commitments.

Distance learning includes courses offered by educational institutions or businesses, or other entities away from the regular campus site by computer conferencing, cable TV, telephone conference calls, videocassettes, correspondence courses, or any combination of these. Some courses may be accessed by the student at home. Others may be offered at a public library, business headquarters, factory meeting room, or other community site. Such non-traditional settings, or "schools without walls" can provide non-traditional students with the flexibility they need in order to earn college degrees or obtain training for new careers. One result of the diverse demographic patterns emerging at this century's end is that a growing number of adults with disabilities are seeking educational and career opportunities. Distance learning is an option for adults with disabilities who are unable to participate in regular campus classes.

Distance learning programs com-

prise a part of the system of lifelong learning, which has been steadily expanding for many years. Change itself has become the rule, not the exception. Educational services are moving from the classroom at formal institutions of higher education to sites in businesses and community agencies, as well as totally off-site using electronic technology. According to the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education (1985) over two-thirds of organized learning opportunities for adults are provided by a diverse array of schools and non-collegiate institutions. Not only are the higher education institutions changing, but so are the learners. Increasing numbers are attending on a part-time basis and view learning as a lifelong process.

The resource paper has been developed to assist the many students with disabilities who wish to enroll in postsecondary education for the first time using distance learning, or continue with some form of postsecondary education through distance learning. The resource paper is designed to assist students, their advocates, as well as professionals, in understanding the various ways distance learning programs operate, and to suggest questions to ask institutions which offer distance learning programs.

Students with disabilities may participate in distance learning opportunities for various reasons. Some students may be unable to leave home or hospital. Others may participate in such programs to increase flexibility regarding scheduling and to increase control over the environment in which they perform their academic work.

Students with disabilities are advised to consider first the feasibility of enrolling in a regular campus program. If, after discussion with campus disability support services staff, it seems impossible to enroll in a regular program, distance learning may be an option which would permit the student to access educational alternatives in order to pursue an academic degree or attain other educational goals. Since institutions offer different types of distance learning programs, students are advised to investigate the options. The rest of this resource paper will describe the process of enrolling in a distance learning program, means of earning credit toward a degree, methods of instruction, and access to student services. A listing of selected publications, directories, organizations, and institutions conclude the paper.

### ENROLLING IN A DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAM

#### Selecting A Program

A student must decide on learning goals: is he/she seeking to complete an academic degree, vocational courses, specific career training, or personal fulfillment? Once a student decides what type of program to pursue, he/she can consult one of the directories at the end of this resource paper that lists schools offering distance learning programs. In addition, students may contact a continuing education program at their nearest community college or state university to see if distance learning courses are offered. It is

suggested that students check to be sure the school offers the courses required to reach one's goal and that the method of instruction (computer, cable TV, conference calls, correspondence) is personally suitable. Students should also inform the school if they have already earned credit from another institution to determine how many of those credits will be transferrable.

Students may be able to access a distance learning program at their local community college or state institution, although not all courses of study or academic programs at each institution will necessarily be available through the preferred alternate format. Distance learners are advised to check with the institution to be sure the program or course of study selected is being offered completely. If not, one of the directories listed at the end of this resource paper may be consulted to locate an institution that offers what the student requires. If the degree is needed for a new job, a salary increase, or a state license, a student should be sure to find out if the degree earned via distance learning will suffice before investing time and money.

Distance learners are strongly advised to be sure the school is accredited. An accredited institution is one which has earned recognition from an appropriate accrediting commission or association that determined the institution has met acceptable levels of educational quality. The American Council on Education publishes a guide called, **Accredited Institutions of Postsecondary Education** (listed at the end of this resource paper). Students can also contact the National Home Study Council's Accrediting Commission (NHSC), (listed at the end of this resource paper), which is the nationally recognized accrediting body for home study schools. In addition, all states have an agency which oversees higher education which can be consulted about accreditation. It is also wise to find out if the school is known positively or negatively to the Better Business Bureau. Before enrolling, students are urged to get as much information as possible about the school from the institution's brochure, a visit, or from other students.

When choosing a particular post-

secondary institution, students may want to become aware of the importance of academic advising and ask whether it will be offered through computer, telephone, or in person. Academic advisors for distance learners are usually available to discuss degree plans, course selection, prerequisite courses, course content, preparation of portfolios, graduate school, study skills, and other areas of concern. Students and advisors should be able to develop a degree program plan which outlines how the student will complete all or part of the remaining academic requirements. Most advisors realize that adults have numerous responsibilities, and they are usually ready to accommodate varied schedules and widely differing needs.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as well as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), ensure equal access for qualified students with disabilities to all programs. Thus, distance learning programs may provide disability-related accommodations at the request of the student. HEATH can send pertinent material on Section 504 and the ADA by request. Students may also request a copy of **How To Choose A College: Guide for the Student with a Disability** from the HEATH Resource Center, which contains suggestions about organizing the search and tips for decision-making. The booklet lists a number of questions to ask one's self as well as questions to ask the institution about disability-related needs.

### Financial Aid

Students who enroll in a distance learning program that leads to an associate, bachelor, or graduate degree at an accredited institution may be eligible to receive monies to cover tuition and related expenses from the Federal Financial Aid programs. Students should request from the HEATH Resource Center a copy of **Financial Aid for Students with Disabilities**, a resource paper that discusses the process of applying for financial aid. Students may also check with their employers about tuition reimbursement programs. For aid programs that require full-time status, a student must enroll for at least the minimum number of credit hours required at that institution to be considered full-

time before being awarded these monies. Some correspondence courses which are vocational or for personal fulfillment may be restricted from the Federal Financial Aid programs. To obtain complete information relating to funding assistance, consult with the financial aid administrator on campus.

## EARNING CREDIT

### Transfer of Credit

Most postsecondary institutions place a limit on the total number of credits that students may transfer from regionally accredited four-year colleges and universities, and some schools will only accept a limited number of semester hours of community college work. Students can also receive credits from some training programs offered by the military, employers, and professional associations if the courses have been recommended for credit by the American Council on Education, which sponsors both the PONSI program (Programs on Noncollegiate Sponsored Instruction), and the Military Evaluation Program. Students should consult with their academic advisor to see if the course work they have successfully completed is listed in the **National Guide to Educational Credit for Training Programs**, (listed at the end of this resource paper) published by the American Council on Education, and to learn how to request an official transcript from the ACE Registry. Some institutions may also accept correspondence courses that are offered for college-degree-level credit by regionally accredited colleges. A comprehensive list of correspondence courses is available from the Peterson's Guide, the **Independent Study Catalog**, (listed at the end of this resource paper.) Students should be very careful to select courses that are offered by accredited institutions.

### Proficiency Examinations

Most non-traditional higher education programs will grant credit for successful attainment of passing grades on approved college-level proficiency examinations. CLEP (the College-Level Examination Program) and PEP (the Proficiency Examination Program) administer

more than 75 exams. They are given at hundreds of testing centers all over the U.S. and, by special arrangement, many of them can be administered almost anywhere in the world. CLEP is offered by the College Entrance Examination Board, known as "the College Board" (CN 6600, Princeton, NJ 08541-6600). PEP is offered in the state of New York by the Regents External Degree-College Proficiency Programs (Cultural Education Center, Albany, NY 11230), and everywhere else by the American College Testing Program (P.O. Box 168, Iowa City, IA 52243).

Each college or university sets its own standards for passing grades of the CLEP or PEP, and also decides for itself how much credit to give for each exam. Both of these factors can vary substantially from school to school. If, because of a disability, a student needs additional time, alternative testing formats, use of assistive technology, or any other reasonable accommodation to demonstrate acquired knowledge, he/she should apply for the accommodations directly with the CLEP or PEP examination's office. The academic advisor may be able to provide more information on the procedure for requesting disability-related accommodations and for learning about the minimum score required by your institution to receive credit.

### **Portfolio Assessment**

Portfolio assessment (documentation of work and life experiences) is a way for many undergraduate degree-seeking students, including those with disabilities, to earn credit for college-level learning gained through paid or volunteer work, independent reading, and other life experiences that may be difficult to demonstrate via traditional testing methods. An academic advisor can help the student match his/her knowledge to academic subjects that fit into his/her degree program. Students must make a formal application for portfolio assessment at the selected school. Faculty experts will evaluate portfolios of work or life experiences for credit. Some schools place a limit on the number of credit hours a student can earn through portfolio assessment.

## **METHODS OF INSTRUCTION**

### **Computer Conferencing**

Many adults with disabilities who have regular access to a computer may be able to take classes via the computer. The American Open University (AOU) program of the New York Institute of Technology, the college's distance learning program, provides college courses and degree programs via computers to students who are physically disabled, or who otherwise cannot come to the college campus. Through the AOU program, courses leading to Bachelor of Science degrees are offered to students worldwide. These are the same courses and degree programs available to on-campus students. The unique aspect of the AOU program is that students use a computer or terminal (or a TT - Typed Text- out-fitted as an ASCII terminal), to communicate with other students, faculty, and staff. The computer communication system is not time-sensitive, which means that students can communicate no matter how slowly or quickly they type, whether they use a keyboard and screen or other means of using the computer, and regardless of the individual's time schedule. Since modern technology allows persons with even the most severe disabilities to use microcomputers, this communication system provides access to an undergraduate college degree program to any individual with computer capability.

### **Cable TV**

The University of Maryland University College (UMUC), the campus of the University of Maryland System that serves adult, part-time students, is now offering courses for a degree completion program through a system that includes cable television. Students study specially developed print materials and textbooks and watch specially produced programs over a cable network that reaches 19 million homes nationally. Students are able to take courses in subjects ranging from management to English.

This program is conducted through a consortium that includes eight other universities (Washington State University, Kansas State

University, Colorado State University, The George Washington University, University of Arizona, Utah State University, University of New Orleans, and University of South Carolina) in the U.S. Students are able to take courses from these universities simultaneously, using a toll-free telephone line to communicate with their assigned professor. Submitted assignments generally consist of three research papers for each course. Final examinations are administered at such places as local educational institutions and are monitored by local proctors. This method is a way higher education institutions can serve students with or without disabilities who have job and family commitments. Students whose disabilities prevent them from enrolling and attending regular campus classes also benefit.

The courses offered through UMUC with the toll-free telephone line can be accessed through the Maryland relay service for those students who are hearing impaired. Students with learning or other disabilities can tape these courses and review them later at their own pace and as many times as needed to acquire the knowledge. Students who are blind or visually impaired may request print material in alternate media such as audiocassette.

### **Interactive Telephone**

As the demand increases for college faculty to present workshops, conference sessions, and staff development training throughout the county, state, or nation, telephone conference calling has become increasingly popular. Rio Salado Community College, which is part of the Maricopa Community College District in Arizona, has developed the SUNDIAL Network. This Network allows a faculty member to conduct class from any telephone. Some faculty have conducted class from a telephone booth at an airport, from home, from their desk at work, and from as far away as London. The SUNDIAL Network links students who are homebound to a professor via telephone. Some of the students who are homebound have disabilities; others cannot leave home because of conflicting obligations, or they simply do not have time to attend an outside class. Some students are able to take



courses at their employment site using the telephone on their desk. Students with disabilities can listen and participate in class by using a regular telephone receiver, a speaker phone, or a headset. Through this method, students are able to tape the call and review it later to be sure their notes are accurate.

The classes are conducted like any other course offered by the college and students pay the same tuition. Rio Salado operates eight to ten teleconference classes per year. The telephone lines of the students and teachers are linked through a bridging device that can join up to 28 telephone lines for simultaneous, interactive instruction. In addition, the bridge can break down the 28 lines into smaller groups, for example, to allow the students to do group work, and then reconnect all 28 lines.

Queensborough Community College of the City University of New York initiated the External Education Program for the Homebound for people who are unable to attend classes on campus because of a disability. The program equips classrooms on campus with speaker telephones so that students may participate in classes from home and interact freely with instructors and classmates while the class is in session. The telephone system makes it possible for students who are homebound to enroll in regular courses and meet all the requirements for the Associate degree or a specific certification program.

When necessary, special instructional equipment such as microcomputers, audiocassettes, or any other assistive technological device is supplied for the duration of a course. Counselors work closely with students to determine their needs and the best ways to meet them. Tutors, proctors, counselors, and staff assistants travel to students' homes regularly to provide instruction, pick up or deliver necessary materials, give exams, set up computer and lab equipment, and offer assistance that the student may need.

Another feature of the Queensborough Community College program is its Cooperative (Co-Op) Education Program. The Co-Op Program has the ability to accommodate students who are homebound. While students with disabilities who

can commute complete their internships in the workplace, students who are homebound are placed in home-based work situations. Like the commuting students, they work for real employers in regular jobs. Many of the students who are homebound make use of the new practice of "telecommuting" by computer. Students who "telecommute" connect home computers to computers in the workplace by telephone, and are able to "pick up" and submit work assignments, input data files, and perform other tasks easily and efficiently.

### Videocassettes

For working adults with disabilities who wish to study at their own pace and earn academic credentials, the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) in New York has mounted a successful videocassette program using various combinations of low-cost video and interactive technologies. RIT has developed 40 courses from which students may structure a degree program in applied arts and sciences. Courses are organized around a core of videotaped presentations. The videos are available through the local PBS affiliate, local cable company, or through bookstore rentals. Such availability allows students in Illinois, California or anywhere else, to enroll in the RIT program and obtain the videos from the local sources. At present, most of the videocassettes are closed captioned, but RIT hopes in the near future to have all courses closed-captioned.

### Correspondence Courses

There are two kinds of correspondence study, or home study, courses: vocational and academic. Vocational courses (secretarial, meat cutting, appliance repair, etc.) offer useful training, but in most cases the courses do not lead to a degree. On the other hand, universities and teaching institutions which offer academic correspondence courses (from accounting to physical science) may offer them for credit, which can be applied toward degree requirements at almost any college or university. Many of the institutions have a limit on the number of correspondence course credits that they will accept toward a degree. However, there

are some schools that will allow students to complete a degree totally through correspondence study. All of the major correspondence schools listed in directories at the end of this resource paper will accept students living anywhere in the U.S.

A typical correspondence course consists of from 5 to 20 lessons, each one requiring either a short research paper, written answers to questions, or an unsupervised test graded by the instructor. All correspondence courses require a supervised final examination that can be taken anywhere in the world as long as a suitable proctor can be found. Many schools set limits on how quickly and how slowly students can complete a correspondence course. The shortest time is generally three to six weeks, while the upper limit ranges from three months to two years. Students should check with the school to determine the number of courses that can be taken at any one time.

Correspondence courses might be especially well suited to some students with disabilities. For example, these courses can work well for students who are homebound, students with learning disabilities who benefit from working in a non-threatening environment at their own pace, students with hearing impairments who need to rely on this essentially print-based method, and students who are visually impaired that benefit from requesting material on audiocassette or in large print.

The University of Wisconsin-Madison has a distance learning program which enrolls students from all over the country. Students may also have course guides on computer disk for easy access, for output such as voice synthesizer or various print-to-screen or braille technologies. In addition to making course materials accessible, accommodations are made with regard to examination procedures. Some of these include giving students additional time to complete their exams; arranging for proctors to visit students, rather than requiring students to go to the test sites; and providing structural/architectural modifications to the sites as needed. The University of Wisconsin has established a staff liaison to work individually with students and faculty to plan for making appropriate and reasonable accommodations so that students

can complete their work successfully. Such accommodations include allowing students to submit "written work" in alternative formats (e.g., on tape or on computer disk). Those students who are in need of tutoring can access such a service by having a faculty member visit the student's residence (local students only), and arranging to interact through on-line computer media.

## ACCESS TO COLLEGE'S STUDENT SERVICES

Many individuals with disabilities who access distance learning programs do not realize that they can use and benefit from the institution's student services. Such offices have different names on different campuses, such as Dean of Students, Office of Special Services, or Office of Disability Support Services. In order to obtain accommodations such as, print materials in alternate formats, extended time for completing the work, or use of an interpreter or notetaker, students with disabilities must disclose and document their disability to the Disability Support Services Office. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the ADA apply to all distance learning programs. Contact the HEATH Resource Center for the brochure **Section 504-The Law and Its Impact on Postsecondary Education**, and **ADA Reprints** which explain the legal rights of students and responsibilities of institutions.

Another important student service is the career planning and placement office. Toward the end of the student's study program, he/she may begin to work with this office. Students who are not able to visit the office are encouraged to fax or mail their letter of application, resume, etc. to the office, so a career counselor can provide feedback. Students with disabilities have been able to perform practice interviews over the telephone with a career counselor. Students may also communicate with the campus financial aid office.

Students in distance learning programs should be able to access most of the programs in student services at community colleges and universities. Some distance learning programs operate from very small offices and are themselves not able to offer extensive student services, but will try to accommodate by

referring the student to the services offered to on-campus students. To increase the success of students enrolled in distance learning programs, faculty and administrators are encouraged to be creative when seeking to provide academic and student services to students with disabilities.

As demand for education by persons with disabilities continues to grow, distance learning will be an important factor in facilitating access. Many adults with disabilities who have already successfully completed a traditional program, can also participate in distance learning programs as a means of continuing "lifelong learning".

## SELECTED RESOURCES

Carnegie Commission on Higher Education. (1985). *The corporate classroom*. New York: Carnegie Foundation.

Gibson, Chere. (1992). Distance education: On focus and future. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 42 (3), 167-179.

Lamdin, Lois. (1992). Earn college credit for what you know. *Council for Adult and Experiential Learning*. Chicago, IL.

Mandel, Alan. (1991). Portfolio development and adult learning: Purposes and Strategies. *Council for Adult and Experiential Learning*. Chicago, IL.

Spille, Henry and Stewart, David. (1989). *Diploma Mills*. ORYX Press.: Phoenix, AZ.

## SELECTED DIRECTORIES

**Accredited Institutions of Postsecondary Education (1991-92)**  
American Council on Education  
ORYX Press  
4041 N. Central Avenue  
Phoenix, AZ 85012  
(800) 279-6799

**(The) Adult Learner's Guide to Alternative and External Degree Programs**  
American Council on Education  
ORYX Press  
4041 N. Central Avenue  
Phoenix, AZ 85012  
(800) 279-6799

## Directory of Distance Education Through Telecommunications (1991)

National University Continuing Education Association  
Division of Educational Telecommunications  
One Dupont Circle, Suite 615  
Washington, DC 20036  
(202) 659-3130

**The Distance Education Handbook**  
An Administrator's Guide for Rural and Remote Schools  
ERIC/CRESS, P.O. Box 1348  
Charleston, WV 25325  
(800) 624-9120

## Peterson's Guide to Independent Study (1992)

National University Continuing Education Association (NUCEA)  
Department 2341, P.O. Box 2123  
Princeton, NJ 08543-2123  
(800) 338-3282

## SELECTED ORGANIZATIONS

Center for Adult Learning and Educational Credentials Programs on Noncollegiate Sponsored Instruction  
American Council on Education  
One Dupont Circle, Suite 250  
Washington, DC 20036  
(202) 939-9490

(The) Council for Adult and Experiential Learning  
223 West Jackson Blvd., Suite 510  
Chicago, IL 60606  
(312) 922-5909

Instructional Telecommunications Consortium  
American Association for Community Colleges  
One Dupont Circle, Suite 410  
Washington, DC 20036  
(202) 728-0206

National Home Study Council  
1601 18th Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20009  
(202) 234-5100

## SELECTED INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION WHICH OFFER DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAMS

New York Institute of Technology  
American Open University  
Central Islip, NY 11722  
(800) 222-6948

Queensborough Community College  
CUNY  
External Education Program for the  
Homebound  
222-05 56th Avenue  
Bayside, NY 11364  
(718) 631-6397

Rio Salado Community College  
Maricopa Community College  
District  
SUNDIAL Network  
640 North 1st Avenue  
Phoenix, AZ 85003  
(602) 223-4000

Rochester Institute of Technology  
Distance Learning Office  
One Lomb Memorial Drive  
P.O. Box 9887  
Rochester, NY 14623  
(716) 475-5089

(The) State University of New York  
Regents College  
1450 Western College  
Albany, NY 12203  
(518) 474-3703

Thomas A. Edison State College  
Admissions Office  
101 W. State Street, CN 545  
Trenton, NJ 08625  
(609) 984-1150

(The) University of Maryland  
University College  
Admissions Office  
University Blvd. at Adelphi Road  
College Park, MD 20742  
(800) 777-6463

The author and the HEATH  
Resource Center wish to thank  
Esther Braun, University of  
Wisconsin; Betsy Frank, Rio Salado  
Community College; Jerry Ice,  
Thomas A. Edison State College;  
Henry Spille, American Council on  
Education; and John Strain,  
University of Maryland University  
College, for their invaluable contri-  
butions to this paper.

Mario D. Payne  
July 1993

This resource paper was prepared  
under Cooperative Agreement No.  
H030C00001-92, awarded to the  
American Council on Education.  
The contents do not necessarily  
reflect the views of the U.S.  
Government, nor does mention of  
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