

History of Distance Education

The foundations of Distance Education can be traced back to the late 1800's. One of the first forms of distance education was correspondence course study. Sir Isaac Pittman founded Sir Isaac Pitman's Correspondence Colleges in England in the mid 1840s. Correspondence courses took advantage of the then new rural free delivery of mail to deliver course material to students.

Students worked independently on course material and interaction between faculty and students was limited to one-way communications. Within a few decades, correspondence courses were developed in Germany, Canada, Australia, the Soviet Union, Japan, and the United States (Matthews, 1999).

William Rainey Harper (1856-1906) was an early pioneer in both education and distance education in the United States. He is known for helping establish the first college-level correspondence courses by mail while serving as the first president of the [University of Chicago](#). He implemented an extension program at the University of Chicago creating the world's first university distance education program. Rainey was an outspoken advocate of correspondence study and predicted that some day correspondence students will far outnumber classroom students (Simonson).



Early students of distance education consisted largely of students located in rural or remote areas that did not have geographical access to educational institutions. Another major population of distance learners in the United States were members of the military. The number of correspondence courses increased significantly after World War II when many veterans hurried to complete the education they had missed while in the service" (Sherron & Boettcher, 1997).

Many early distance education courses were not affiliated with institutions of higher learning. However, some higher education institutions offered correspondence courses or extension courses through the continuing education branch of the university. The University of Chicago, [Iowa State](#) and the University of Iowa were early adopters of Distance Education in the United States. The University of Iowa's current [Center for Credit Programs](#) web site states,

"Correspondence study courses, the oldest form of distance education, were offered by the University of Iowa beginning in 1916."

Early distance education courses employed **First** and **Second Generation** communication technologies. First generation (1850s to 1960) was predominately one technology and consisted of print, radio, and television. As new media emerged such as radio and television, these new technologies were integrated into distance education delivery methods.

Second generation (1960-1985) distance learning courses utilized multiple technologies without computers. The media used to deliver distance education within the second generation included audiocassettes, television, videocassettes, fax, and print.

The establishment of the [British Open University](#) (1969) marked a significant development in the delivery of distance education by offering a mixed-media approach to distance learning technologies. Learning materials (text, audio & visuals) were sent to students by mail and supplemented by broadcast radio and television (Matthews, 1999).

History of Distance Education (continued)

Like the Open University, [Walden University](#), founded in 1970, is a well known and accredited, fully distance learning institution in the United States. Walden offers doctoral and master's degrees in Education, Health and Human Service, Management and Psychology.

Multiple technologies including computers and computer networking make up the third generation (1985-1995) technologies used for distance education delivery. Fourth generation technologies, the current generation, combines previous media but also incorporates high-bandwidth computer technologies including:

- desktop videoconferencing
- two-way interactive real-time audio and video
- web-based media, etc.

Each new generation of distance learning technologies increases opportunities for student-to-student and faculty-to-student contact and collaboration (Sherron and Boettcher, 1997).

What is Distance Education?

There are about as many names for distance education as there are definitions of distance education. First and second-generation distance education was often referred to as:

- Correspondence Courses, Extension Courses, Extended Studies
- Home Study, Continuing Education, External Studies
- Self-paced studies, Independent studies, Distance Learning

What is Distance Education? (continued)

Terms used to describe third and fourth generation distance education include:

- Cyber Education , Online Education, Virtual Education
- Technology-supported Education, Hybrid Education, Distributed Learning
- E-learning, Web-based Education

Definition of Distance Education

Providing education at a distance is the simplest definition of distance education. Today, distance education, e-learning, virtual education, or whatever name you prefer is basically a method of teaching where the student and instructor are

separated by time or space, or both. The US Department of Education defines distance education as:

"the delivery of instruction over a distance to individuals located in one or more venues." The National Education Association (NEA) defines distance learning as "courses where more than half of the instruction taking place is when students and faculty are in different locations."

The [NCA Higher Learning Commission](#) definition of distance education states:

"For the purposes of accreditation review, Distance Education is defined as a formal educational process in which the majority of the instruction occurs when student and instructor are not in the same place. Instruction may be synchronous or asynchronous. Distance education may employ correspondence study, audio, video, or computer technologies."

Distance Education Today

The "digital revolution" is having a major impact on distance education today. Traditional universities and new dot-com companies are jumping on the distance education bandwagon, competing to develop distance education programs that take advantage of new and improved methods of distance education delivery. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported the following statistics on Distance Education for the 1997-98 academic year (NCES, 1999):

- The number of distance education degree programs in the US increased by 72% from the 1994-1995 survey
- About 1/3 of the nation's 2 and 4 year institutions of higher education offered distance education courses
- An estimated 54,470 different distance education courses were offered, most (49,690 were college-level, credit granting courses)
- Enrollments in distance education courses was estimated at 1,661,100

Arthur Levine defined three basic types of colleges and universities that are emerging today (Levine, 2000):

- "**Brick Universities**" - traditional residential institutions
- "**Click Universities**" - new, usually commercial institutions, also known as "virtual universities"
- "**Brick and Click Universities**" - a combination of traditional and virtual universities

[Jones International University](#) is an example of a virtual/click university. Jones is the first fully accredited, completely online university and offering both bachelors and master's degrees.

Distance Education Today (continued)

International Data Corp. predicts that the U.S. e-learning market will grow to more than \$14.7 billion by 2004. Much of the revenue comes from corporations paying to

train their employees as companies save time and expense by eliminating travel (Forgrieve, 2002). After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, online training became even more attractive to many corporations.

Distance education is a "hot" topic in many educational publications and journals today. For example, in the Fall 2001 Educause Quarterly publication, three of the article titles had the words "Distance Education or Distance Learning" within the title. The titles were "Confronting Cost Issues in Distance Education, "The Death of Distance Learning?" and "Student Distress in Web-based Distance Education." There are also many organizations and conferences about distance education.

Below are some of the current national and international conferences and organizations devoted to the subject of distance education:

Conference	Organizations
Telelearning Conference	Instructional Telecommunications Council
18th Annual Conference on Distance Teaching & Learning (University of Wisconsin - Madison)	Telecoop (Telecommunications Cooperative of Colorado)
Online Learning 2001	European Association of Distance Teaching Universities
Distance Learning: The Future of Education Conference	ALN (Asynchronous Learning Networks)
9th Annual International Distance Education Conference	US Distance Learning Association
E-Learn 2002	Socrates Distance Learning Technologies Group
Conference on Research in Distance and Adult Learning in Asia	WebED

Distance Education Today (continued)

The terms "Distance Education" and "Distance Learning" are slowly being abandoned because they no longer adequately describe the range of educational options and delivery methods offered today. For example, is a course delivered primarily on the Web but having three on-campus sessions during the semester a distance education course? Does it make a difference if the students live a long distance from campus or are on-campus students? Distributed, hybrid, and blended education are terms often used to describe courses that meet both face-to-face and at a distance.

According to Hurst, distance education is shifting from a peripheral activity on college campuses, to the center of many higher education institutions (Hurst, 2001). Based on its long history and current trends, distance education should continue to be an important and viable educational option for many students.

Supplemental Online Resources:

- [PBS - Distance Learning Week - A Brief History](#)
- [Distance Education Pioneers](#)
- [History of Distance Education](#)
- [Distance Education, An Introduction](#)

References

Hurst, Fred. "The Death of Distance Learning?" *Educause Quarterly*, Volume 24, Number 3, 2001 58-60.

Matthews, Diane. "The Origins of Distance Education." *T.H.E. Journal*. Vol. 27, No. 2 Sept. 99. 56-66.

National Education Association. "A Survey of Traditional and Distance Learning Higher Education Members." Washington, DC June 2000.

Sherron, Gene T. and Boettcher, Judith V. "Distance Learning: The Shift to Interactivity." *CAUSE Professional Paper Series*, #17, 1997. 1-32.

Simonson, Michael, & Smaldino, Sharon, & Albright, Michael, & Zvacek, Susan. Teaching and Learning at a Distance, *Foundations of Distance Education*. Prentice-Hall Inc. 2000.

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Distance Education at Postsecondary Education Institutions: 1997-98. NCES 2000-013, by Laurie Lewis, Kyle Snow, Elizabeth Farris, Douglas Levin. Bernie Greene, project officer. Washington, DC: 1999.