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Distance Learning, Online Education, Electronic Education, Electronic Learning...Call It What You Want.

By Barbara Snyder M.A.

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Whatever you want to label "learning at home" and however you want to define the latest buzz words for non-traditional education, you can find a program and method that suits your needs. Right now over 1.2 million people in the U.S. participate in some form of distance learning, with a projected expansion to 2.3 million in just a few years.

In looking at this rapidly expanding and viable form of education and training, there are a few basic things you need to consider and some decisions you need to make in order to create the environment that will best suit your needs. You need to know the what, the why, the benefits and the how of the various forms of distance learning.

Distance learning (correspondence courses) started in Europe in the 1800's and has evolved into a multifaceted term that serves many purposes. Some of the forms of distance learning are: correspondence courses, online education, internet based education, electronic education, e-education, electronic learning, and e-learning. How these terms differ will depend upon how the institution defines and labels the programs which they offer. To simplify the whole concept, let's say that these terms represent ways of learning away from a "brick and mortar" facility. Some distance learning and/or online programs may or may not be connected to a university or college. There are many programs that are independent and are not affiliated with any institution.

Distance learning offers a variety of paths to personal goals which include: GED, associate degrees, bachelor degrees, graduate certificates, master degrees, doctoral degrees, non-credit training courses, and others. Whether a person is seeking a degree, keeping professional skills updated, or pursuing skills for an interest area or hobby, there is a program or offering that should work.

Why are so many people turning to distance learning? What are its advantages? On a personal level look at such pros as: maintaining privacy; provides convenience; enables a flexible schedule; allows for balancing job and family obligations; working at own pace, going slowly or accelerating learning; can be less expensive; great for homebound individuals; no unnecessary travel; no formal class attendance; and can "learn while you earn." These are a few of the many things that are causing quite a number of people to take an entirely different approach to attaining knowledge/skills and/or earning a degree.

Those who advocate against an alternative of distance learning, often site the lack of socialization which is a part of a traditional type of education. However, not everyone is looking for the classroom activities, college events/parties, and the interactions that are a part of a school campus. Many of the classroom activities such as discussion and support can be achieved online. The other things that an online education will reinforce are: reading – ebooks, up to date references, current research; listening – through audio lectures or clips; seeing– through graphic illustrations and demonstrations; doing – assignments, quizzes, exams, research papers; and

speaking/communication – through email, chats, and electronic discussions. A distance learning program can be far more than just reading and writing.

What are the requirements for becoming a part of a distance learning program? Many programs require a minimum of a GED or taking an admissions test. Usually, the process for applying will include: an application; transcripts; test scores; an essay; and letters of recommendation. The less formal the program, the less formal the requirements. There is a wide range in answering this questions. However, what is necessary for an online program is the right computer equipment with the internet connection (high speed), word processing capability; email; and multimedia player. The program you choose will provide more specific details for recommendation about equipment and software.

In choosing a program there some questions to ask as you do your research and make your selection. Ask about the following: help/support is offered; qualifications of the instructors; number of years the institution has provided services; is it an accredited program; details about the curriculum; and multimedia elements of the program. By the way, accreditation is voluntary since there is no officially sanctioned entity in existence. However, most schools considered the six regional accrediting agencies listings to be legitimate agencies. Ask if it is regionally accredited.

The last thing you need to think about is your motivation and work ethic. If you are a good reader (good reading comprehension skills) who doesn't procrastinate and can avoid distractions, you will be a good candidate for an alternative approach to education. In this age of global education and the need for current knowledge and skills, this is a fast delivery system that will bring all the technological advancement right into your living room instantaneously. It works for more than a million people, and it can work for you.

Visit our Resource Center on Distance Learning at: <http://sbmag.org/distancelearning.html>

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Distance Learning Makes Life Easier

By Matthias Reightman

Do you have a desire to continue your education but are just not sure how to fit it into your busy schedule? Or perhaps you want to finish a degree but live too far from a college to make the drive for classes. Whatever your situation, do not be discouraged. Distance learning makes it possible for almost anyone to take a class or work toward a degree regardless of where they live.

Distance learning is becoming increasingly popular in higher education. Educators and administrators realize that people are busy and that gaining a traditional education is not realistic for everyone. Distance learning makes it possible for people of all ages to complete a variety of classes toward degrees of many kinds.

Distance learning can take place over the internet through online courses or by correspondence through the mail. Having internet is definitely helpful for distance learning, but it is certainly not required. All you really need is an address and a mailbox and you can be well on your way to finishing a degree.

If learning from home sounds like it might work for you, begin to research different colleges and universities that offer distance learning as an option for students. A simple internet search or a search at your local library should be able to highlight appropriate schools for you in no time. You will have to consider too what kind of degree or program you hope to study in. Don't rush into studying something until you have explored many options.

A great thing about distance learning is that you can continue with the rest of your life while taking classes. You do not have to stop working, change jobs, or stop spending time with your family and friends. With distance learning you can take as few or as many classes as you want to. Some times in your life may be too busy for more than one class but at other times you may be able to fit in two or three distance learning classes. Distance learning is flexible and it allows you to be in control of your schedule. You will have to look hard to find an option that is as flexible and accommodating as distance learning.

Is there a specific program or degree that you have always dreamed about studying? If so, now is the time. Let distance learning make your educational dreams come true while keeping your life simple and easy.

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An advisor to many people thinking about gaining more education, Matthias Reightman is an advocate for distance learning. See if distance learning is right for you by visiting

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