

Is Distance Education for You?

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Millions of Americans are currently enrolled in distance learning institutions. The flexible study schedules, independent learning, and self-paced courses are attracting more students than ever. If you are interested in enrolling in a distance education school, you probably have a lot of questions. Choosing the right school for you is an important decision, and the well-informed student is the most likely to succeed.

Q: *What are the benefits of distance education?*

A: Distance learning students experience the freedom of studying when and where they choose. Students can accelerate through courses very quickly, or they can move at a slower pace. For many students, this individual approach to education pro-

motes a more productive learning environment. Distance learning also allows a student to maintain his or her career, family, and personal commitments while taking courses. Students who live in rural areas find that distance education permits them to enroll in programs that otherwise would not be available in to them.

Q: *What types of students take distance learning programs?*

A: Distance learners are often independent, industrious students eager to gain more knowledge in a chosen field. Often, they are older and more experienced than “traditional students.” These adult learners are highly motivated to gain valuable job skills or earn a degree.

Q: *What types of distance learning courses are available?*

A: Students enjoy a wide variety of distance learning courses, including high school diploma programs, vocational courses, and college degree programs. DETC schools currently offer more than 500 subjects with an array of programs ranging from accounting to yacht design. DETC accredits schools offering courses at the Kindergarten through First Professional Degree levels.

Q: *What should I look for in a distance learning school?*

A: Make sure the school's courses are up-to-date, that it maintains competent staff and instructors, that it adheres to ethical standards, that it is truthful in its advertising methods, and that it is financially responsible and can continue to meet its obligations to students. Find out how long the school has been in operation, and whether the school is accredited by a recognized accrediting agency.

Q: *What methods will I use to study at a distance?*

A: DETC schools use almost every form of modern communications technology. Some schools are primarily "correspondence based," which means you send and receive materials through the mail. Other schools operate almost entirely online. Information is provided on Websites, online libraries, threaded discussions, and live Internet chats. Currently, many schools offer a combination of print and online. A recent DETC survey shows many distance learning schools are increasingly using the Internet for

communication. More students can enroll, make tuition payments, submit assignments, and communicate with professors and other students via the Internet. The survey also shows, however, that many distance learning schools are not prepared to completely abandon print-based methods. Your preference of learning methods, be it correspondence, online, or a combination of both, is personal, and you should find the school that best suits your needs.

Q: *As a distance learning student, how much contact can I expect from my instructor or fellow students?*

A: This depends on the school, but accredited institutions work hard to foster communication between faculty, staff, and students. Instructors usually mail assignments to the student, complete with detailed feedback. Professors also communicate with students via the Internet. Live chats, threaded discussion boards, and e-mail help the student develop a sense of community when taking a distance learning course. With the Internet, the student does not have to feel like a completely solitary learner—a classmate or instructor is only an e-mail message away.

Q: *I'm concerned that a distance education school could really be a "fly by night" operation. How can I protect myself?*

A: Make sure the school you're enrolling in is accredited by a legitimate agency. This means the ac-

crediting agency is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and/or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. Accreditation is a voluntary process and ensures that the school has submitted to a thorough evaluation process, and that its academic, business, and ethical standards have been assessed. You can also check with the Better Business Bureau in the institution’s city to learn about any complaints filed against the school.

Q: *How do I recognize a diploma mill?*

A: It can be difficult to determine whether a school is actually a “diploma mill”—an institution granting degrees for money with little or no work required. Accreditation can assure students that the school is not a diploma mill, but not all unaccredited schools are suspect. Remember, accreditation is voluntary on the part of the school. You should be very cautious, however, if an unaccredited school exhibits any of the following warning signs: the school claims to be accredited when it is not, or its accrediting agency is not recognized; degrees are granted solely or mostly on life or work experience; the school lacks state licensure to operate; the school charges either very high or very low fees for what it provides; degrees can be purchased from the school; the school fails to provide a list of faculty and their qualifications; the school does not provide a physical address or business location; degrees

can be earned in a very short period of time.

Q: *What exactly does accreditation mean?*

A: Accreditation is a non-governmental, peer review process designed to determine whether a school meets specific standards. The school voluntarily submits to a thorough evaluation to prove it can meet and maintain the accrediting agency’s published standards. Accreditation can benefit a school by encouraging improvement through self-evaluation process and by assuring the public that the school has clearly defined objectives and is working to improve and maintain all aspects of its operations. The U.S. Department of Education (USDE) and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) are the two third-party agencies that recognize legitimate accrediting agencies in the United States.

Q: *Does it matter if I live in one state and my school operates out of another state? What about foreign universities?*

A: In general, a distance learning student can enroll in an accredited distance learning program located in any state, or even in another country. If your prospective school is located outside of the United States, be sure it is accredited by a recognized U.S. accrediting agency, such as the DETC. Accreditation standards and practices vary from country to country, and degrees earned at a foreign university may not be equivalent to

those earned at a U.S. institution.

Q: *Will the credits I earn from a distance learning institution transfer to a college in my area?*

A: That depends. If your school is accredited by a recognized agency in the United States., your college level credits may be transferable, but no one can guarantee acceptance in all cases. The decision to accept transfer of credit always lies with the receiving organization (college registrar, employer, etc.). Since there are more than 4,000 colleges and universities in the United States, the DETC is unable to provide a list of schools that accept credits from specific DETC institutions. When you explain that the institution is accredited by a national or regional accrediting agency, the decision is often favorable.

Q: *How do the expenses of distance learning schools compare to traditional schools?*

A: Distance education institutions—DETC schools in particular—tend to be less expensive than resident schools. This is another encouraging factor for adult learners. The DETC recently completed a study comparing costs of college programs and found that students often pay one-half to two-thirds less at a DETC school.

Q: *I am interested in homeschooling my child. Can you help me with this?*

A: DETC accredits distance learning high schools that offer full high

school diploma programs; several of these schools have been operating for more than a century. Receiving a diploma from a DETC-accredited high school is considered far more rigorous than obtaining a G.E.D. Most college registrars and employers accept these nationally accredited diplomas the same as those from “traditional” high schools, but you may wish to check ahead of time to be sure. Parents can choose to buy individual courses or enroll their students in the accredited programs. Attending a distance learning school is different from homeschooling. You should learn about your state’s homeschooling regulations and contact your local homeschooling organization for more information.

Q: *What is the future of distance education?*

A: Millions of students study via distance learning every year, and this method of learning is expected to continue to increase. DETC institutions have a healthy enrollment history—over 140 million Americans have enrolled in DETC institutions since 1890. New technology developments continue to support and assist distance learning students. Currently, distance learning institutions are enjoying record enrollment rates around the world.

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