TECHNIQUES

## Leading Online Learning Initiatives in Adult Education

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### Abstract

Adult learners often face barriers to participation in traditional classroom instruction. As technology access grows and adults naturally incorporate technology into their daily lives, adult education programs are finding innovative ways to blend technology with instruction through quality online learning opportunities. This article highlights the tips, strategies, and best practices learned from the deployment of GED-i, a nationally recognized online GED test preparation curriculum developed at the Center for the Application of Information Technologies at Western Illinois University. However, the procedures presented are applicable to all online/distance learning options and are based on solid administrative leadership strategies such as determining benchmarks, establishing and communicating clear processes and procedures, and setting professional development goals.

### Introduction

GED Program Coordinators struggle each year to accommodate the diverse needs of adult learners seeking their GED credentials. GED educators are challenged to engage students in this world of instant communication and connection to thousands of resources and media at the click of a button. Internet technologies have the capability to
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overcome the barriers of time and place, and students are definitely ready for the inclusion of online learning. As a result, adult education programs are seeking effective and innovative strategies that merge existing curriculum and technology without straining existing budgets. After exploring the information presented in this article, program administrators and instructors will be able to identify the essential steps involved in developing the foundation for deploying online learning at the local program level.

Online learning opportunities have helped learners connect their daily use of technology to meaningful educational opportunities. Additionally, the integration and deployment of quality online learning creates opportunities for adult education programs to provide greater access to GED Test Preparation Courses. Furthermore, as community colleges and universities expand their online learning opportunities, it is critical for local adult education program administrators to evaluate their ideas of the traditional teaching and learning experience to include online learning in order for students to develop the necessary skills to transition into higher education or enter skilled employment opportunities.

Leading an online learning initiative can feel like a daunting task. Using a blueprint for creating a program specific vision for online learning, administrators can lead their programs toward the successful and meaningful addition or expansion of online courses. The blueprint consists of setting benchmarks, selecting the curriculum, determining deployment method, and identifying the intended audience. The blueprint for online learning consists of the following steps:

- Set realistic goals and benchmarks. Think about how many students will be served with the online curriculum. Consider the screening criteria for participants and ensure the goal numbers are realistic. Critical elements of setting benchmarks include developing a marketing plan and determining assessment strategies.
- Determine the deployment method. Will the online course be delivered solely at a distance, as a hybrid, as a classroom supplement, or as a combination of methods? This decision will guide the remainder of the planning process.
- Establish clear policies and procedures for reaching goals. Once goals are determined, clearly established processes and procedures for all staff members to follow are outlined. These include expectations for monitoring teacher and student

interaction that holds teachers accountable for their time. Consider this the road map that identifies where students and teachers are beginning, where they are going, and how they are going to get there.

- Define your target distance learning population. Typically, your target population is a student who is reading at the 9th grade level who has reliable access to the Internet and has basic computer skills. By defining your target audience, you can set realistic marketing / recruitment, and retention goals for GED-i or any distance learning program.

- Communicate expectations for distance learning to all staff. Examine the expectations of online instructors. Should they have online office hours? How often will they check student submissions? How will they submit student progress information? When will students post-test? Answers to these questions must be clearly communicated to all staff members so everyone can meet the expectations.

- Develop professional development goals. Establishing professional development goals as they relate to the online learning initiative will help you prioritize how the trainings fit into the overall implementation plans.

- Assign a "go-to person" in your department for the online learning initiative. Make sure there is a designated online leader in the program, whether it is you or a staff member. The leader must be knowledgeable about the online learning program and must be well trained and prepared to serve in this role before implementing and/or training instructors to teach online.

- Make sure your interest in technology and online offerings are genuine. Although it is not necessary to be a technical expert, it is important to promote and create "buy in." Be prepared to head-off potential resistance when presenting new ideas in learning/teaching with technology and execute ways for innovation to take root in the program.

## Conclusion

Through insightful and forward-thinking initiatives, adult education program administrators can bring online learning opportunities to the adult learners' doorsteps. The essential first steps involve planning as

administrators determine how to best fit the online learning into their existing curriculum. Online projects such as GED-*i* can help programs provide flexible, dynamic, and high quality curricular choices and build the bridge from traditional classroom instruction to viable distance learning initiatives that will prepare students for the shift in academic experiences in higher education.

## Reference

Center for the Application of Information Technologies, Western Illinois University. GED-*i*. Retrieved from http://info.ged-i.org