Distance Education Survey Analysis

Prepared for University XYZ

At the request of University XYZ, The Hanover Research Council conducted a survey of leading distance education programs. The goal of the study was to identify best practices and develop a profile of successful programs. This report is structured in the same manner as the survey, with sections covering the following topics: program size, faculty support and curriculum development, and assessment of distance education functions.
Introduction

At the request of University XYZ, The Hanover Research Council previously developed a report on best practices in distance education. That report presented prominent secondary resources in order to identify leading practices in the field. In order to shed additional light on this topic, The Hanover Research Council followed-up with a survey of leading distance education programs that targeted U.S.-based colleges and universities.

The survey consisted of three main parts. The first section asked participants a series of questions generally pertaining to program size, including distinctions between synchronously and asynchronously delivered courses. Subsequent sections covered faculty support and curriculum development as well as distance education assessment. This report follows the structure of the survey instrument, with the analysis presented in correspondence with the survey questions.

With the purpose of identifying best practices at the core of this project, a sample of exemplary institutions was assembled. As a starting point, we selected winners of the U.S. Distance Learning Association Best Practice Awards. From this list, we then added programs cited as notable examples of distance education on the USDLA website, and completed the list with a number of other successful distance education programs. In total, we collected responses from 13 participating institutions, 11 of which completed the survey in its entirety. The following table presents the institutions included in our survey sample, along with the total number of enrolled distance education students (self-reported) for each:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Distance Education Enrollment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) Institution</td>
<td>9,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abilene Christian University</td>
<td>311</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California Lutheran University</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boise State University</td>
<td>5,528</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bay Path College</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sullivan University</td>
<td>3,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Massachusetts (UMassOnline System)</td>
<td>8,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lehigh University</td>
<td>660</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ball State University</td>
<td>2,188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rochester Institute of Technology</td>
<td>2,264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of North Carolina at Greensboro</td>
<td>1,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kent State University</td>
<td>1,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston University(^1)</td>
<td>2,500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Given this overview, in the following section we explore trends related to distance education program size.

\(^1\) This institution only provided enrollment data and cap level data on the survey.
Program Size

The first section of questions in our survey collected information on distance education programs pertaining to program size. Survey items asked respondents to provide details such as enrollment levels, staffing requirements, and instructor levels. The mix of questions in this section sheds light on the scope of distance education programs, and allows us to analyze the relationships between various indicators of size.

Enrollment levels

The first item on the survey asked respondents to provide the number of active students enrolled in their institution’s distance education program at the conclusion of the most recent term. The respondents reported an average enrollment figure of 2,808. According to the results, the minimum reported enrollment figure was 147, while the maximum was 9,000.

Next, two questions pertaining to enrollment caps for asynchronous and synchronous distance education courses were presented. For asynchronous courses, all thirteen institutions in the sample provided a typical enrollment cap range. The great majority of respondents (9 out of 13) reported a cap level of “20-50 students.” In contrast, two respondents noted an enrollment cap of “100+ students,” while “less than 20 students” and “50-100 students” were each selected once.

Asynchronous Distance Education – Enrollment Cap Ranges

Respondents were also asked to provide any additional notes or details along with their asynchronous course enrollment caps. Three participating institutions indicated that the cap level varies greatly between courses. The University of North Carolina at Greensboro and Boise State University cited course level as a factor in determining specific enrollment caps, while the University of Massachusetts explained that there is great variation between programs and campuses. California Lutheran University—an institution that selected the “20 to 50 students” range—elaborated that its distance
education courses are capped at 20, but in some cases the institution will allow up to an additional five students into the course. Another respondent, Abilene Christian University, reported the typical cap as being “100+ students” and noted that there is no enrollment limit for its courses, but that for each 20 students a new section with its own instructor is created. Lehigh University also does not limit enrollment, but indicated that most courses usually consist of less than 20 students. Finally, Bay Path College indicated that enrollment is typically capped at 20 students, but if additional enrollees are added to the course a discussion facilitator is assigned to assist the instructor.

For synchronous courses, the most commonly reported enrollment cap was also “20-50 students,” with six respondents selecting this option. “Less than 20 students” was selected by two respondents and “100+ students” was selected once. A total of 9 respondents provided an enrollment cap for synchronous courses.

![Synchronous Distance Education – Enrollment Cap Ranges](image)

With regard to additional “notes or explanations” pertaining to synchronous distance education enrollment caps, four respondents indicated that they do not offer any synchronous distance learning options. Additionally, two participants noted that their respective institutions have very few courses that are delivered in this manner. Finally, one institution reported that they do not generally consider synchronous distance courses as part of the distance education wing of the school. Rather, individual departments handle these courses, when they are offered.

According to the results, four institutions reported that they set the same cap levels for both synchronous and asynchronous courses. For the remainder of the respondent institutions offering both course types, asynchronous cap levels are higher than those for synchronous classes.
Faculty details

The remaining questions in the first section of the survey shifted the focus to distance education faculty and staff details. First, respondents were asked to provide a range for how many faculty members are currently employed full-time as distance education instructors. The most common response was “1-5” faculty members, with four institutions selecting this range. The “6-10” range was selected by three respondents, while “21-30” and “100+” were each selected twice. Finally, only one institution indicated employing “51-100” full-time faculty members. Interestingly, there did not appear to be a correlation between enrollment size and the number of full-time faculty, although as discussed below, institutions with larger enrollments tend to employ more part-time faculty.

![Number of Full-Time Distance Education Instructors](image)

Respondent institutions were then asked to select a range for the number of faculty members that are employed part-time as distance education instructors. The most common response was “100+” with four selections. The “51-100”, “31-50”, and “6-10” ranges were each selected twice, while “21-30” and “11-20” were selected once each.

![Number of Part-Time Distance Education Instructors](image)
One interesting trend that is apparent in the data is the breakdown of full-time and part-time faculty in the two largest distance education programs that were surveyed (in terms of enrollment): The Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) and the University of Massachusetts (UMassOnline System). Each had significantly more faculty serving distance education on a part-time basis. TBR, with 9,000 enrollees, reported 20-30 faculty dedicated full-time and 100+ part-time. Similarly, the University of Massachusetts, with 8,000 distance education students, indicated having 1-5 full-time faculty with 100+ dedicated part-time instructors.

The next question asked respondents to list the most common rank among full-time faculty members teaching distance education courses. There was little consensus between respondents on this survey item, although several institutions specified that there was great variation between course levels and programs as to which ranks were teaching the courses. The most common mentions included professor or tenure/tenure-track faculty, followed by associate professor and assistant professor.

Participants were then asked whether graduate students or others who have completed a distance education course are used as teaching assistants or administrative aids in distance education. The majority of the institutions indicated that they, in fact, use students as TAs or aids (8 responses); but a few of these institutions did note that the use of students as TAs or aids varied widely or was uncommon. Four institutions noted that they simply do not use students as TAs or aids. Interestingly, one institution elaborated that students who have successfully completed a program have been hired as adjunct faculty to teach a course in the program from which they graduated.

The final two questions of the first section measured the number of individuals, other than faculty, that are employed specifically to support the respondent institutions’ distance education programs. As a follow-up task, participants were prompted to list the skills and services that these non-faculty support staff provide for the distance education program. Because of the unique nature of the feedback collected for these two survey items, we present the responses in the form of mini-profiles for each participating institution below.

**Tennessee Board of Regents**

Has 70 staff members employed as mentors. These mentors provide support for faculty instructors.

**Abilene Christian University**

Has nine employees: five working in course development, two handling clerical and managerial tasks, and two financial aid staff members. Among these nine employees, there is one director of course development, as well as three instructional designers and one videographer who work with faculty in course development. One staff
person handles a particular program’s complex practicum details, while a staff member for another program coordinates the course facilitators. The financial aid advisors work with the online students to address their needs.

*California Lutheran University*

Employs two full-time personnel—a program manager and an assistant manager—as well as many Graduate Research Assistants (GRAs). These support staff work on operations, marketing, registration, scheduling, vendor relations, and interface with University support systems.

*Boise State University*

This institution could not provide a firm figure for its number of full-time support staff. However, this team is responsible for an impressive load of support functions including: technical management and support; instructional design and teaching courses for online education faculty; managing information/course set-up in the student information system; managing websites; responding to potential student inquiries; providing support to students in admissions, registration, course start-up; providing support to registered students and faculty teaching distance courses; student advising; supporting the development of new distance programs; needs assessments; supporting involvement in multi-institutional programs; accreditation; managing policies, procedures, and processes; tracking and reporting on data; marketing; managing instructional budgets, writing faculty contracts, and other financial responsibilities.

*Bay Path College*

Has a total of two full-time staff: a director of distributed learning and an online student support coordinator. The institution also has a LMS server and tech support outsourced to an off-site data center. The full-time support staff members are responsible for student support, technical support for the LMS, orientation facilitation for students and faculty, faculty support and training in online learning pedagogy.

*Sullivan University*

Employs 20 such support staff with the following breakdown: seven in admissions, four in financial aid, three in student services, two in administration, two in instructional support, one in human resources, and one registrar. These staff members are responsible for recruitment, placement testing, admissions, financial aid advisement, matriculation, credit transfer, registration, program advisement, LMS troubleshooting, and problem solving within the student realm. To support faculty, these staff deal with learning management system training and technical support, instructional design and development assistance, online pedagogy training, and creation and population of online course shells.
University of Massachusetts

Has 12 employees in the central office and 10-20 support staff at each of the institution’s five campuses. These full-time support staff are responsible for instructional design, technology development and support, marketing, program development, and academic advising.

Lehigh University

Has 17 full-time support staff that perform the following functions: technology faculty training, student support, and administration.

Ball State University

Nearly 30 full-time support staff who are primarily responsible for student and administrative services.

Rochester Institute of Technology

Has between 20 and 25 full-time support staff who are responsible for the following: support services (training, technical support, call center, proctoring services, studio facility & support, computer lab facility and support), instructional design, instructional technologists, web development, media creation, and Research/Analysis.

It is interesting to note that two additional institutions (specifically, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and Kent State University) reported not having support employees that are wholly dedicated to the distance education program, but rather sharing support staff with other programs.
Faculty Support and Curriculum Development

The second section of the survey collected information related to faculty support and curriculum development. Questions pertaining to faculty support probed areas such as compensation structures, faculty experience levels, and training opportunities. To gain a better understanding of curriculum development practices, this section was comprised of questions that gathered various details such as the amount of time spent developing new courses and the methods by which they are developed. There was also a grouping of survey items in this section that discuss the technological support and tools used for course delivery.

Faculty support

The first item in this section asked respondents to indicate which models are used to compensate distance instructors—participants were instructed to select “all that apply.” The most commonly chosen model was faculty overload pay (9 institutions), followed by regular annual salary (8 institutions), stipend (7 institutions), per course credit/release time (6 institutions), per student (5 institutions), per new course (5 institutions), and adjunct pay (1 institution). Regardless of enrollment size, the majority of the institutions noted using some combination of two to three different compensation models.

Compensation Models for Distance Education Instructors

The next question asked about the experience levels of distance education instructors, specifically whether or not they have previous experience with teaching distance education. Responses on this item were mixed across the board, with five institutions suggesting the level of experience varied, two institutions indicating their faculty does have prior experience, and four institutions reporting the majority of their faculty members do not have prior experience. Sample responses include the following:
Almost all of the current faculty have experience given the amount of time we have been involved in distance education. However, we continue to attract more faculty who do not have experience in a fully distance course.”

Some do and some are first-timers”

“We have new online faculty coming on-board every semester as new programs are introduced; however, we have a significant cadre of experienced online faculty.”

Another item collected data on whether or not each institution provides training or professional development in distance education. All eleven participants that answered this question reported that they do offer such training, with specific opportunities varying across respondents. Several institutions mentioned common types of training and professional development with foci on course development and design, face-to-face instruction, and Blackboard training. A few respondents provided more detailed descriptions of their employee development and training options:

Boise State University encourages all faculty without experience to participate in a faculty training and course development program prior to teaching a distance course. The institution offers an 8-week online intensive course for faculty in best practices, practical tips, and instructional design strategies. This is followed by a course design phase where new instructors receive guidance on how to develop a distance education class. The institution also uses Quality Matters—“a faculty-centered, peer review process designed to certify the quality of online courses and online components”—in the course design process.

The University of Massachusetts requires that faculty complete a training course in online instruction before they are permitted to teach a distance education class. The institution offers a mixture of face-to-face and fully online training, as well as various hybrid methods.

Rochester Institute of Technology provides all distance education faculty with the opportunity to participate in an “essentials of online teaching” course—a three-week class administered online to instructors who lack experience with the distance education learning format.

Course development

On the topic of course development, respondents were asked to indicate the method by which new distance education courses are typically developed. The majority of the

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2 See: http://www.qualitymatters.org/
institutions (seven respondents) indicated that the courses are created by in-house staff or faculty. Two institutions noted that distance education courses are developed in an online platform, while one respondent institution selected the “created by both in-house and outside authors.” Another respondent—the University of Massachusetts—indicated that the institution uses a hybrid of an online platform combined with in-house generated content.

In terms of preparation time typically required for the development of new distance education courses, most respondents (6 out of 11) indicated that the process takes 20 or more days. The second most common selection was “16-20 days” (3 out of 11 respondents), while “11-15 days” and “2-5 days” were each selected once.

**Typical Amount of Preparation Time Required for New Distance Education Course Development**

Another survey item asked respondents what kind of technical support is provided to instructors while they are developing or conducting a distance education course—participants were instructed to choose “all that apply.” The most common selection was access to “technical support staff,” with nine respondents indicating such. The remainder of the responses were selected as follows: “distance education office support” (7 respondents), “training seminar/class” (6 respondents), “help line” (5 respondents), and “technical support website” (4 respondents)—one respondent wrote in that distance education instructors have access to a recording studio and computer lab.

As a follow-up to the previous question, participants were asked to indicate whether or not the level of technical support provided to distance education instructors is sufficient. According to the results, the majority of respondents felt that the level of support is, indeed, sufficient (7 respondents). Three of the participants noted mixed
feelings about the level of support, stating that it was adequate but could be improved upon in various ways. One commonly mentioned potential improvement was access to an instructional design team. It is interesting to note that only the respondent from Sullivan University reported an insufficient amount of technical support for developing and conducting distance education courses. According to the respondent, Sullivan University only provides technical support staff for instructors; however, the institution is in the process of developing on-demand online tutorials as well as a compilation of best practices in distance education to which instructors will have access.

The next survey item collected information from respondents on the types of distance education related expenses for which the institutions provide extra funding. Again, participants were asked to choose “all that apply.” The two most common forms of additional funding were “faculty overload pay” and “software purchased,” each selected by 8 respondents. Other expenses included “computer equipment purchased” (7 selections), “costs for campus service units” (7 selections), “graduate or teaching assistants” (6 selections), “faculty release time” (4 selections), and “ISP costs” (4 selections).

**Types of Distance Education Expenses for Which an Institution Provides Additional Funding**

![Bar Chart]

**Interactive television**

The final questions in the Faculty Support and Curriculum Development section were all centered on the use of interactive television (a two-way audio/visual course delivery system). First, respondents were simply asked whether or not they use such a system in the delivery of distance education courses. Five individuals noted that their respective institutions “do not” use interactive television, while the remaining
six participants were evenly split between “regular” and “rare” use of such technology. The three institutions that reported regular use of an interactive system provided the following details:

- Lehigh University uses a digital satellite broadcast as well as asynchronous and synchronous streaming video over IP and Internet2. The institution also utilizes videoconferencing over ISDN and I2.

- Rochester Institute of Technology utilizes Adobe Connect, Chat via Course Management System, and Adobe Presenter. Sessions can be live, or recorded to be streamed or placed on Course CDs.

- Kent State University indicated that some of its blended learning courses use Polycom.

As a follow-up to the previous item, respondents that reported the use of interactive television were asked which instructional techniques are incorporated into courses utilizing this technology—participants were prompted to select “all that apply.” All six institutions that noted using interactive television in some capacity reported “instructor demonstrations” and “instructor lectures” as techniques that are utilized. Other techniques highlighted by these six respondents include: “instructor-student discussions” (five selections), “instructor-student question and answer sessions” (five selections), “student discussions” (three selections), and “student group work sessions” (three selections).

### Instructional Techniques Incorporated into Courses Using Interactive Television

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructional Technique</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instructor demonstrations</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor lectures</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor-student discussions</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor-student question and answer sessions</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student discussions</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student group work sessions</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Chart showing the number of respondents for each instructional technique.](chart_image)
The final question in this section comprised another follow up to the interactive television survey item. Institutions that utilize this technology were asked where, specifically, interactive television class sessions are held. The most prominent response was “on-campus facilities” (four respondents), followed by “in student’s home” (two respondents). Two participants wrote in their own responses as follows:

- At the students’ place of work (Lehigh University)
- On-campus classroom and off-campus receive site classroom (University of North Carolina at Greensboro)
Distance Education Assessment

The final section of survey questions collected information from participants on the topic of distance education assessment. Specifically, the final set of survey items gathered data on the tools used to assess distance learning, the variables utilized when measuring success, and how the distance education program fits into the overall organizational structure of the institution.

Assessment tools

The first question in this section asked the respondents to indicate which tools are used to assess student learning in a typical distance education course. Again, participants were directed to select all answer choices that apply. All 11 respondents that answered this question reported using subjective assessment tools (e.g., essay, written responses to case study, report). Similarly, “standardized tests (multiple choice, true or false)” was selected by 10 respondents, while eight respondents indicated the use of “student portfolios” for assessment purposes. “Capstone experiences” and “activities (internship, interviews, etc)” were each selected by six respondents. Three respondents provided additional detail for this question. Boise State University, for example, reported that assessment tools were dependent on the course, program, learning objectives, and faculty. Sullivan University added that applied projects constitute another method used to assess student learning, and Lehigh University indicated that the institution makes use of topic specific evaluations for assessment purposes.

Tools Used to Assess Typical Distance Education Courses

Institutions that conduct student learning assessments upon course completion were asked whether or not these assessments are administered in a proctored environment. Of the nine participants who responded to this question, six reported that student
learning assessments are not administered in a proctored environment while three indicated that they are.

Next, participants were asked to indicate all of the tools that are used to evaluate faculty members’ success in teaching distance education courses. According to the results, “students’ course evaluations (including learning expectations, outcomes, satisfaction with instruction, etc)” comprise the most common evaluation tool—this option was selected by 11 respondents. “Student surveys (satisfaction, exit, outcomes, etc)” was selected by nine respondents, “student retention rates in the course” was selected in seven instances, and “students’ academic achievement in the course (average GPA, etc.)” was selected by four respondents. Rounding out the group, “Staff peer review” and “Alumni satisfaction survey” were selected twice and once, respectively.

Three respondents elaborated upon additional tools that their institutions utilize to measure faculty members’ success in teaching distance education, including a chair evaluation (Boise State University), a review of the online course measured against established standards (Sullivan University) and an in-house review of online course content delivery (Rochester Institute of Technology).

Tools Used to Evaluate Faculty Success in Teaching Distance Education

- Student job placement in field of study
- Staff peer review
- Anonymous interviews with other faculty, students, and staff
- Students’ course evaluations (including learning expectations, outcomes, satisfaction with instruction, etc)
- Employer satisfaction survey
- Alumni satisfaction survey
- Student surveys (satisfaction, exit, outcomes, etc)
- Students’ academic achievement in the course (average GPA, etc.)
- Student retention rates in the course

Number of Respondents
On the topic of assessment variables, respondents were asked to indicate all variables that are used by their respective institutions to measure the overall success of distance education courses/programs. The range of selections on this item suggests that institutions analyze multiple variables when measuring overall success, albeit with a greater emphasis placed on indicators tied to student retention and demand.

There were a total of 61 selections made by the 11 respondents that answered this question. The most common selections, as indicated above, were “Student retention rates” (9 respondents) and “Student demand for the program” (8 respondents). “Student graduation rates,” “Instructors’ satisfaction with distance education structure and organizational support services,” and “Financial strength of the program/course” are also commonly used to measure the overall success of distance education courses and programs (7 respondents each).

### Variables Utilized to Measure the Overall Success of a Distance Education Course/Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student demand for the program</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program’s comparative advantage in region</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program’s connection to career paths and higher educational attainment for graduates</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial strength of program/course</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student scores on graduate and professional school placement exams</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructors’ satisfaction with distance education structure and organizational support services</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ assessments of their own learning expectations and outcomes</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employer/customer satisfaction with students</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student job placement in his/her field</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student graduation rates</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student retention rates</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Distance education in the organizational structure

The final question of the survey asked where distance education fits within the organizational structure of the institution. The overwhelming majority of respondents (8 out of 11) reported that distance education falls within “Academic Affairs.” In contrast, Boise State University reported that the program lies within the institution’s School of Continuing Studies. Two institutions filled in their own choices for this survey item: Sullivan University reported that distance education has its own campus within the institution, and The University of Massachusetts noted that the program fits under a combination of academic affairs and continuing education.
Note

This brief was written to fulfill the specific request of an individual member of The Hanover Research Council. As such, it may not satisfy the needs of all members. We encourage any and all members who have additional questions about this topic – or any other – to contact us.

Caveat

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