



Continuing Education

Linda Mitchusson, Editor

DISTANCE LEARNING, A TREND WHOSE TIME HAS COME

How many times have you made excuses about skipping a class because of a schedule conflict or you didn't want to drive in the snow or you missed a required prerequisite? Welcome to distance learning in the '90s, which tosses these excuses aside. Advancing technology and a growing demand for continuing education make distance learning a hot educational trend. You no longer need to go to the classroom: The classroom comes to you.

Distance learning course providers are not limited to large national universities or corporations. Pikes Peak Community College in Colorado Springs, Colo., currently has two students living in Antarctica enrolled in its Fire Science Associates Degree program.

What is distance learning? Distance learning is the acquisition of knowledge and skills through presentation and display of information transmitted through various technologies. It provides a meaningful and productive learning experience outside the traditional classroom. Distance learning delivery systems include television, interactive television, satellite, and online computer.

The United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA) is an organization committed to promoting and developing distance learning. According to the USDLA, effectiveness studies between distance learning and traditional learning for business, military training, and adult learning show no significant differences.

Distance learning is not a new concept. Stanford University pioneered this concept more than 30 years ago in response to Silicon Valley's demand to educate high-tech engineers and computer scientists.

Stanford online—The SITN (Stanford Instructional Television Network) currently offers more than 200 Stanford courses from the school of engineering. These courses are stored on a video server and are available to the students on demand.

Companies sponsor students who may earn an M.S. degree or take courses to maintain professional skills. Their corporate market is worldwide. Stanford Online distinguishes itself from other Internet course providers with its state-of-the-art technology delivery. The courses integrate video with audio, text, and graphics.

University of Phoenix's online campus—The University of Phoenix's Online Campus was introduced in 1989. It offers several undergraduate degrees and five graduate master's degrees. The graduate degrees include a traditional Master's of Business Administration as well as specialized degrees such as a Master's in Technology Management.

The University of Phoenix's conventional classes meet once a week. The professor facilitates the discussion, and students turn in homework and meet for a weekly study group session.

In contrast, the Online Campus for a designated course week is open from

Thursday through Wednesday, 24 hours a day. The three-credit classes meet for a six-week period. Students take one class at a time. Access to the University's server is through direct-dial to the server or through the World Wide Web. Class size is limited to 13 students. Students dial in for the professor's syllabus and weekly notes. Class participation is akin to a news group on the Internet and is asynchronous. The class "news group" serves as a bulletin board discussion allowing students to communicate electronically.

Students are required to participate five times a week, but experience shows much higher participation. Many students log on several times a day. Transcripts of class discussion are accessible, and homework assignments and papers are e-mailed. The advantages of this delivery system are convenience and exposure to a more geographically diverse student body.

The trend. The Internet Age is accelerating distance learning's acceptance. As technology advances, the quality of the delivery systems will improve. A current challenge is how to provide low-cost, high-quality online videos.

Distance learning course opportunities abound. The convenience, accessibility, and variety may be just the incentive you need to take the course that you have been putting off.

IMA's Committee on Education fully supports distance learning for continuing education, as evidenced by the very successful Financial Management Network, which brings timely CPE into more than 800 companies each month. The Committee is evaluating satellite and online computer delivery systems and expects to test both in 1997-98.—*Kristine Mayer Brands, CMA*

Kristine Mayer Brands, CMA, is controller, Berkeley Software Design, Inc. She is a member of the IMA Committee on Academic Relations. She can be reached by phone (719) 593-9445; fax (719) 598-4238; or Internet: brandsk@bsdi.com