



*Improving
Distance
Education
for Adult
Learners*

Working Paper No. 4

Exploring Policy Issues and Options in Distance Education for Adult Learners

September, 2004



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Project IDEAL is a consortium of states working together to develop effective distance education programs for adult learners. The Project IDEAL Support Center at the University of Michigan provides technical support in the areas of teacher training, research design, data collection, data analysis and reporting. It develops working papers on topics of importance to distance education. Through collaborative research and practice involving member states, the Center works to provide quality distance education for adult learners across the country.

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Working Paper 4

**Exploring Policy Issues and Options in
Distance Education for Adult Learners**

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September, 2004

Prepared with Funding From

U.S. Department of Education,
Office of Vocational and Adult Education
Division of Adult Education and Literacy
and

A consortium of states working together to explore
the potential of distance education to reach adult basic learners
Arizona, Arkansas, Idaho, Illinois, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland,
Massachusetts, Missouri, New York, North Carolina, Ohio,
Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Washington and West Virginia

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Abstract

**Exploring Policy Issues and Options in
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Over the past two years, states involved in Project IDEAL have been exploring the use of distance education to reach adult learners not currently served in existing programs. They have done this on a small experimental basis and have collected data to help evaluate the effectiveness of this novel approach to delivering adult education. Several states have sufficient data to declare distance to be a viable option and they are now at a point where they are ready to create policies and guidelines to cover distance education.

The state directors of adult education in New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island were interviewed about policy issues related to distance education for adult learners. Each of these states has well established distance learning experiments or programs in place. This paper describes the challenges these directors see to creating policy in this arena. It also identifies policy options that are under consideration or in place in the states as well as areas where they would like assistance and guidance from the U.S. Department of Education. The Director of the Department of Adult Education and Literacy (DAEL) was interviewed to learn about the Department's perspective on distance education, and these views are presented.

States believe policies are needed to cover six areas: funding, staffing, training, technology, assessment and accountability. While they are capable of developing their own policies in these areas, they look to the federal government for assistance in four areas: guidelines for the delivery of services, developing and supporting distance technologies, appropriate strategies for learner assessment, and identification of the characteristics of adults that could profit from a distance program.

For its part, DAEL is supportive of states providing a distance option and carrying out experiments to better understand what program elements are important for meeting the needs of adults who cannot attend classroom programs and to better understand what the real costs of distance are. Both state and federal officials point to the need for additional research about the use of distance education with adult learners to help guide the development of policies.

Policy Options for Distance Education

Introduction: The Search for New Delivery Options in ABE

Historically, classroom-based adult basic education programs reach only a small fraction of the adults in need of services. For this reason there has been interest at the local, state and federal levels in exploring innovative approaches to increasing access and providing more options for adult learners. Distance education, which has been used effectively in higher education and professional development, is an intriguing possibility. It is appealing because it removes many of the barriers – location, transportation, child care, and work schedules – that prevent some adults from continuing their education.

In 2002, adult education directors from 13 states joined with researchers from the University of Michigan to form a consortium called Project IDEAL (Improving Distance Education for Adult Learners).¹ The purpose of the consortium is to develop, pilot and evaluate distance education programs for adult basic education students. Pilot programs in each state are experimenting with program designs and curricula to learn if distance learning will “work” for at least some adult basic learners. The pilot programs are also designed to yield data that will help with the formulation of policy should distance education appear to be a viable delivery option.

Over the past two years, the consortium has been accumulating knowledge about effective ways to implement distance learning programs for adult basic learners. Several states have sufficient data to declare distance to be a viable option and they are now at a point where they are ready to create policies that cover a distance option. (Indeed, New York already has a policy, though they think it may need to be revised to take account of Internet-based forms of delivery and support.)

Because of the nature of distance education, policies that make sense for classroom programs may not translate easily to distance education. As an example, consider seat time - the amount of time a student physically spends in class or in assigned activities, such as the computer lab. In classroom programs seat time is used to determine when to enroll classroom students and when to assess students for gains. It is also used to determine how much an agency receives to pay for instructors. How do you measure seat time for students who are not learning by “sitting” in a classroom? Similar challenges arise in regard to assessment. If there is a proxy for seat time, will distance learners accumulate enough seat time in a single year to warrant posttesting? Getting posttests from any adult learner is a challenge; it may be even more difficult for distance learners. Will distance learners return to a center for posttesting in sufficient numbers that their data can be included in the state’s NRS report? Policy will need to be developed to address these, and other issues related to distance learning.

In what ways should policies for adults learning at a distance mirror those already in place for adults learning in classrooms, and when would different policies be more appropriate? Within each state, who will make those decisions and what information will

¹ <http://projectideal.org>

be brought to bear in the process? As state directors of adult education consider a more established role for distance education within their states, they must address these and other questions.

Five States Consider the Challenge

Five state directors, whose states are fairly far along in the experimentation process, were asked to reflect on policy issues related to distance education for adult learners. Staff from the Project IDEAL Support Center conducted individual interviews with the following state directors:

- Thomas Orsini of New York, joined by Kathleen Sheehy, Associate in Continuing Education
- Randy Whitfield of North Carolina,
- Denise Pottmeyer of Ohio, joined by Karen Scheid, Education Consultant for Distance Learning
- Rose Brandt of Pennsylvania, and
- Robert Mason of Rhode Island.

They were asked to identify policy issues and options that they are considering as they lay the foundation for incorporating distance learning into the existing network of services in their states. New York, which already has a policy, was asked about the policy. The following questions were used to structure the conversations:

- What do you see as the major policy issues affecting distance learning in your state and why? How is your state addressing these issues? What policy options are under consideration?
- What current policy (state or national) is a barrier to making distance learning “work” for adult basic education students and programs?
- What support would you like to see from the federal government?

This paper explores the key issues that they identified as critical for policy development, what options, if any, are under consideration, what policies exist that are a hindrance to the expansion of distance learning from an experimental to mainstream activity, and what could the U.S. Department of Education do that would assist the states in making distance a viable option in their states.

To learn about the federal perspective on distance education an interview was conducted with Cheryl Keenan, Director of the Division of Adult Education and Literacy (DAEL) in

the Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE). The federal perspective is also included in this report.

Administrative Background: How Is Policy Made?

In all states policy responsibility resides with the state department of education. But each of the five states has taken a different approach to getting guidance for developing appropriate policy. One state has taken a “top down” administrative approach and formed an advisory board that devised a tentative policy for the entire state. Two states have turned to pilot test sites to advise them on appropriate policy based on their experience. A fourth is waiting for more data on distance education before considering whether a distance policy is necessary. The fifth state has already incorporated distance learning into their statewide funding formulas for adult education.

In **North Carolina** adult basic education is provided by the state’s 58 community colleges. Policy is set by the State Board of Community Colleges. Three years ago the Board set up a one-year pilot policy in which community colleges could get full time equivalent reimbursement for distance learning students. They established an advisory board, composed of 14 people (2 from each of the state’s 5 basic skills regions, 2 Deans of Continuing Education and 2 “open” slots). The advisory board was created to develop policy recommendations and state level guidelines and to deal with problems identified by any stakeholder dealing with distance learning. Although the board does not have the authority to enforce policy, most community colleges comply since the board is recognized as a peer group. The state director expects the board to continue to provide guidance to the state as it considers new policies related to distance education.

Pennsylvania took a different approach to the development of policy. The Department of Education’s Bureau of Adult Basic & Literacy Education contracted with a direct service provider, one of 6 regional professional development centers in the state, to manage the state’s Distance Learning Project. In 2002 – 2003, a primary goal of the project was to develop recommendations for policy on performance targets for distance learners. Selected pilot site administrators participated in a focus group and various stakeholders served on an advisory committee that provided input on the development of proposed standards.

Ohio’s department of education utilizes the technology experience of the Ohio Literacy Resource Center (OLRC), one of its funded State Leadership grantees, to provide leadership to the state’s Distance Learning Project. The Distance Learning Coordinator is on staff at the OLRC and facilitates the Ohio Project IDEAL Advisory Committee. The committee is currently comprised of state level representatives from the Ohio Department of Education; the Ohio Literacy Network that oversees the GED on TV statewide project; two representatives from the four ABLE Regional Resource Centers that provide professional development and specialize in distance learning and technology; and OLRC staff. The committee relies heavily on feedback and recommendations from the pilot sites regarding policy development, revisions to the pilot project, and other

issues that steer the state's direction for distance learning. It is likely that pilot site representation will be added to the committee as the project moves forward in the coming year.

Rhode Island has not yet taken any formal steps regarding policy for adult learners studying at a distance. Before addressing policy, the department wants to gather additional information about the process of implementing distance learning programs, the students who study at a distance and pedagogical issues.

New York has incorporated funding formulas for distance learning students into the overall formulas for their adult education programs. The amount of "meaningful contact" between students and teachers is clearly spelled out and students are expected to complete a specified amount of work each week. This approach allows New York adult education agencies to receive financial support for their distance learning efforts in the same way they receive state support for other adult education offerings.

For its part, OVAE endorsed distance education as a means to expand access to services and considers it as a way to improve student achievement.² OVAE is also supporting implementation of distance learning programs in the states by working in partnership with states to define policies related to reporting distance students in the NRS.

Issues and Options From the States' Perspective

The five state directors who were interviewed identified a variety of issues to be resolved before formulating distance learning policy. These include the allocation of limited resources, technology, staffing and professional development, pedagogical issues and accountability and assessment of learners. They all indicated that they wanted more information on each of these topics before establishing policy.

Allocation of Resources

Title II of the Workforce Development Act mandates that adult education programs serve those adult learners with the lowest literacy levels. However, research has shown that the most successful distance learners have at least a 7th grade reading level. Therefore, in times of scarce resources, it is reasonable to ask: should limited funds be used to teach those with the lowest literacy levels or be directed toward adults for whom an educational experience would more likely lead to immediate educational achievement? If monies are to be focused on the lowest level learners, distance learning is not the most appropriate vehicle for providing education. On the other hand, if "most in need" is defined as those with the most barriers to learning, then funding distance learning is appropriate. It enables learners to overcome such barriers as conflicting job and class schedules, lack of transportation or lack of childcare. Distance education also is seen as only one of many possible approaches to reach learners – both those already being served and those

² D'Amico, C. (2003) *A Blueprint for Preparing America's Future—The Adult Basic and Literacy Act of 2003: Summary of Major Provisions*, Washington, D.C.: The U.S. Department of Education.

currently not involved with educational services. Unfortunately, when funds are limited, states must make choices about what services to support. The state directors look to the distance learning experiments to provide additional data on which to base these decisions.

Staffing

Competent instructors are the key to successful distance learning, but state directors acknowledge that they are just beginning to understand the characteristics needed in effective distance education teachers. A second component of the staffing issue is the time required to teach at a distance. Small studies done in North Carolina suggest that teacher time is greater for distance teaching than for classroom teaching because teachers are working one-on-one with students rather than with students in groups. Pennsylvania teachers were evenly split on whether distance teaching took more time than classroom teaching. Teachers who reported that distance learning took the same or less time than classroom teaching reported that the lack of distractions and the on-task focus of interactions with students offset working one-on-one. Staff time, therefore, has implications for a third aspect of the staffing issue: cost. It should not be assumed that distance education will allow a state to reach more students with less cost. This suggests that funding for distance teaching staff could become an issue when decisions must be made about how to spend limited resources.

Professional Development

The need for skilled instructors suggests the importance of professional development for distance teachers. One state director commented on the changing role of the teacher. In distance learning, teachers become the person “behind the scenes” and behind the technology, facilitating the student’s learning. The distance curriculum provides most of the content through which the teacher guides the learner. The teacher also helps the student master the technology and complete activities so at the next encounter with the technology the student can act more independently. Staff development is certainly needed because this kind of teaching requires different skills than classroom teaching. One state director suggested the development of a set of competencies for all basic education and literacy teachers with a subset of special competencies for distance teachers. For distance teachers those competencies include communication skills via a new medium as well as mastery of certain technology skills.

Technology

Another resource of concern is technology—what to fund and how to ensure that students have access and know how to use what’s available. When it comes to identifying what technology, at least one director would like assistance from OVAE in identifying what is “state of the art.” Often states have limited money to invest in technology, resulting in “hodgepodge” systems that are not user friendly for the adult learner. The goal should be to create an electronic resource that students actively use, not simply an “electronic shelf,” that holds information. This requires sufficient electronic infrastructure and

teacher supports to ensure that students can, over time, navigate the electronic resources on their own.

Sustainability

Another area of concern is sustainability—how to include distance learning as part of an agency’s regular services when the pilot funding ends. In Ohio and Pennsylvania, for example, during the experimental years pilot sites received funding for extra instructional hours, special technical equipment (webcams, videoconferencing units) and resource materials. The issue is whether these agencies, as well as other programs, will add distance learning to their services if they see it requiring extra dollars and effort. This suggests that agencies will need to see that distance learning offers something of value above and beyond their regular program offerings. During their pilot efforts, Pennsylvania promoted distance learning as an extension of regular services, offered training and technical support to all agencies, and underscored the value agencies get from the purchase of state licenses that make products available throughout the state. North Carolina reported that a good “selling point” is that agencies can use distance learning to reach un-served students, many of whom then register for face-to-face classes. Thus they use distance learning as a recruitment tool.

After several years of experimentation, Pennsylvania’s funding approach is changing. As of July, 2004, Pennsylvania will no longer fund the distance learning pilot sites. Instead, agencies may choose to incorporate distance learning into their menu of choices for adult learners or they may opt to refer students interested in studying at a distance to a central agency with a cadre of experienced distance teachers. In the second approach the referring agency will get credit (and financial reimbursement) for the student served by the central agency. The referring agency will remain the primary provider and will be responsible for communication with both the student and the central agency. The central agency will be considered the secondary provider. All accomplishments will be credited to both agencies. (Pennsylvania already has this primary/secondary relationship spelled out in policies to address other types of services.) It is too soon to tell how these changes will impact the availability and quality of distance education offered to adults in the state.

In contrast, New York, with its extensive network of distance learning for adult learners, includes distance learners in the state formulas for funding adult education programs. Distance learning falls into one of two models: telephone support and mail support. Each week students and teachers working under the telephone model are expected to have at least one half-hour of “meaningful contact” and students are expected to complete six hours of work. In the mail model, packets are expected to be exchanged via mail every two weeks, and students are required to complete six hours of work per week. By meeting these criteria, programs can receive state funding for their distance learning students in the same way they receive funding for their classroom students.

Assessment and Accountability

Assessment and accountability are among the most complex issues related to distance learning. This includes both pragmatic concerns (e.g., can you get students who may be working totally at a distance to come to a center for pre- and posttesting and, if so, how?) and concerns about meeting state and federal accountability requirements. This issue is particularly salient because of the ways states are funded to serve adult learners. At present, states receive their federal funding based upon census data, but they are eligible for incentive monies if they meet certain goals related to student achievement and accountability. Thus, some states are willing to suspend their usual accountability requirements for pilot programs, but others feel pressed to include all learners in their NRS documentation. These are critical issues for states that are trying to move distance learning programs from the pilot stage to embedding them in the regular offerings of literacy centers.

How Similar Are Distance and Classroom Students?

Assessing distance students raises several questions that are relevant for the formulation of policy. At the heart of these questions is the nature of distance learning and distance students. Are distance students the same as classroom students? Do they study the same subjects, to the same depth, as classroom students? Are there differences in the hours that distance students study that might lead to differences in learner outcomes? Are they as likely to be taking courses to achieve a measurable outcome such as a GED, or are they taking classes on an enrichment or trial basis? Several of the state directors feel that not enough is yet known about distance learning and the characteristics of distance students to answer these questions. Without this information, it is difficult to determine appropriate policies. Most of the state directors talked about this issue in an “if-then” format: *if* distance students study the same things as classroom students, *then* similar assessments are appropriate; *if* distance students are pursuing different educational goals, *then* the existing assessments may not make sense. Thus, there were suggestions that students studying for a GED at a distance might be expected to be assessed in the same way as classroom GED students, but this procedure might not be appropriate for students studying the communication or employment strand of the Workplace Essential Skills (WES) curriculum. This distinction can be seen in New York where only specified curricula (GRASP—a state-developed program, GED Connection, Crossroads Café, Math Basics and SkillsTutor) have been approved as “stand alone” curricula for distance students, while others, such as Workplace Essential Skills which covers a more limited scope, must be used in conjunction with another curriculum.

Seat Time and Enrollment

In classroom programs seat time is an important concept. Learners accrue hours of credit for the time spent on various intake activities as well as learning time spent in a classroom. At the 12-hour point they are usually considered officially “enrolled” in a program. States are exploring the possibility of using a similar approach for distance learners, but using approximations of the face-to-face time inherent in the seat time concept. Some state directors questioned whether the 12-hour standard for enrollment

was as appropriate for distance learners as for classroom learners. The concern was that distance learners may have fewer “up front” hours because they are unable or unwilling to come to a center. Thus, the point at which a distance student should be considered “enrolled” is open for discussion.

States have taken different approaches to assigning equivalencies for measuring seat time in a class. In classroom programs, students are credited with seat time for the amount of time they spend in class as well as other specified activities (e.g., required time in a computer lab.). Since distance students work on their own without a teacher present, seat time is a more amorphous concept. The Project IDEAL Support Center has been working with the states to develop logs that teachers can use to record student work and translate their efforts into seat time. The specific approach taken depends upon the distance curriculum being used. Pennsylvania and Ohio both use seat time logs with the LiteracyLink Curricula (Pennsylvania uses both Workplace Essential Skills and GED Connection; Ohio uses just GED Connection). These logs assign credit based upon the teachers’ assessment that a student has completed a specified amount of work in a unit. In North Carolina, Crossroads Café distance students who pass a mastery quiz earn ten hours of seat time. In Rhode Island, the Seat Time Log for Skills Tutor records actual time the student spends working on a module as well as whether they demonstrate mastery of the module. New York deals with this issue in a slightly different way. The state’s distance learning funding formulas require that students complete a specified amount of work on a weekly basis; this is used in lieu of the seat time information gathered for classroom learners.³

The concept of awarding seat time equivalencies for distance learning students is not without its difficulties. One state director indicated that the idea may be difficult to implement in her state since the state does not give seat time credit for homework—and any independent work done outside the classroom is considered “homework.” It may be possible to draw a distinction between homework, assigned to extend knowledge of what was taught in class, and the work a distance student does in which he or she receives primary instruction outside of the classroom setting. This is complicated, however, by the fact that programs may use a mix of distance and classroom modalities as they strive to find the best way to meet learners’ needs.

A second difficulty is how to give partial credit for completion of parts of activities. For example, teachers in Ohio feel strongly that students should get credit for time spent on activities, regardless of completion, *if* students have met their goals and did not need to complete the whole unit in order to learn what they needed to know.

Testing Distance Students

At the heart of the state and national accountability systems is the use of standardized pre- and post-tests to measure student achievement. Several state directors were

³ For an in-depth discussion of the various strategies for measuring seat time with distance learners, see Johnston, J., (2003). *Accountability in adult education for learners studying at a distance (Working Paper 2)* available at <http://projectideal.org/IDEALPublications.htm>

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concerned about requiring students working at a distance to come to a center for testing, citing the fact that many students are attracted to distance learning because it does not require them to be at a specified location at a specified time. Another concern focused on the viability of online or remote testing for distance students: could ways be established to do this without compromising the validity of the test, and how would this process change NRS guidelines for assessment? State directors see a need for a reliable and valid assessment measure that can be used at a distance. This would be particularly important for students working primarily online. The states are exploring these issues, but are somewhat hesitant to make firm decisions without more research results or more guidance from OVAE on acceptable testing practices for reporting distance learners in the NRS.

State directors are aware that experiments are underway in several states, including Missouri and New York, to administer the TABE (Test of Adult Basic Education) online. They would like to see more research done on the feasibility of online assessments for accountability purposes. New York is planning a pilot test in which distance learning students are provided with computers equipped with PictureTel equipment. This capability will allow the instructor to be in *visual contact* with the student when he/she takes an assessment, thus meeting the existing guidelines for administration oversight. However, even if it proves effective, this system is likely to be prohibitively expensive to implement on a large scale. As another approach, other New York agencies have enlisted the aid of local libraries to administer assessments to distance learning students living in their local service areas.

Ohio is developing ways to include distance learners in the newly revised ABLE standards-based education system that utilizes a Uniform Portfolio System to measure student gains. The portfolio is viewed as an option for assessing student growth if a standardized post-test score cannot be obtained. While the portfolio has possibilities, it poses challenges in determining what should be included, how student work will be obtained from students working at a distance, and whether the scoring system used to evaluate the portfolio will meet NRS reporting criteria.

Assessment of educational gain is of concern because it both provides the teacher and student with feedback on performance and serves as a key measure in state and federal accountability systems. In addition to pre- and post-testing students, another issue is calculating seat time for the 12 hour standard which counts students as enrolled students. Fitting distance students into the NRS guidelines, both in terms of seat time and educational gain, is a challenge because currently there is no “distance student” category in the National Reporting System.

As a result, several state directors allowed their distance learning sites leeway in reporting educational gains of distance learners during the experimental stage of their distance learning projects. For example, in Ohio all students, including distance students, are expected to meet NRS guidelines. However, during the first year of the pilot project, the distance learning programs were given some flexibility with this requirement and were not required to report educational gains for all distance students. Currently the

number of distance students in any state is small enough that a state is not penalized for not reporting them among the total number of students served. However, as the number of distance students grows, these issues will take on greater significance. While recognizing that states feel pressured by these concerns, OVAE prefers that states allow adequate time to experiment before placing accountability demands on these new programs.

Who Is Distance Serving?

A final, larger issue surrounding accountability comes back to the issue of who is being served by distance education. Until there is a clearer understanding of the characteristics of students who choose to learn at a distance and the types of educational programs they pursue, it is difficult to make policy decisions related to accountability. It is likely that states may opt to have different policies related to accountability depending upon the nature of the distance learning programs offered.⁴

State Policy Options Under Consideration or In Place

There are few policies at either the state or federal level aimed specifically at distance learning for adult learners. This reflects the fact that distance learning initiatives are being conducted on a small scale and that states are very much in a learning mode about how to best implement and support these programs. The one exception to this is New York State, which has a sizeable number of adult learners studying print curricula at a distance. They are supported largely by mail and telephone contacts with their teachers. Although New York has an existing policy, it doesn't cover distance study using computer- and web-based curricula such as GED Connection where the role of a teacher is somewhat different. New York is wondering how to adapt these policies as this type of curricula gain in popularity.

North Carolina

Three years ago the State Board of Community Colleges declared, as a one-year pilot, that community colleges could get reimbursed for students who studied at a distance. During that time community colleges could implement distance-learning courses and get FTE reimbursement for their distance students. The state director solicited input from her advisory board to develop policy and determine the amount of FTE credit that would be given for the various pilot programs. The overall project was considered successful and has been continued.

Because seat time formed the basis of North Carolina's existing policy on FTE reimbursement, the advisory board had to decide how to measure "seat time" for distance learners. In responding to a Request for Proposal, ABE programs at the community

⁴ Further examination of this issue can be found in Young, S. J., Johnston, J., & Hapgood, S. (2002). *Assessment and accountability issues in distance education for adult learners (Working Paper 1)* available at <http://projectideal.org/IDEALPublications.htm>

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colleges provided estimates of time spent on each component of the curricula they would use in their distance classes. This information was used to determine the seat time equivalencies that would be granted for distance learning classes. Other information requested in the RFP was used by the advisory board to establish guidelines for distance learning in North Carolina including:

- Students must come to orientation;
- Local programs must describe orientation and testing procedures;
- Local programs do an estimation of contact hour credits for the curricula to be used for distance learning;
- Local programs determine how distance learners will get support and counseling.

Currently the advisory board thinks that some changes are needed in the current guidelines. Each local program usually has its own “twist” on use of a curriculum, so it is difficult to get consistency in the teaching of content from program to program. When adjustments are needed in how a curriculum is used and how contact hour credits are awarded, a subcommittee of the advisory board reviews those issues.

One additional challenge for North Carolina’s distance education efforts is how to market the programs. Although state residents can attend any community college they wish for adult basic education classes, the colleges can only market programs in their own geographic regions. Distance learning makes it feasible for someone to attend a college anywhere in the state. However, existing policy does not enable colleges to advertise their distance programs statewide so that residents would know what is available for them to study.

Ohio

In Ohio, the current policy is that every program, including the distance pilots, must meet the standard for pre- and posttesting. Ohio also uses a Uniform Portfolio System (UPS). Every student must have a portfolio and, if a student leaves a program before a posttest, the agency can use the portfolio to determine educational gain. Ohio is still in the process of validating the UPS against the traditional standardized assessments, (e.g. TABE), currently approved by OVAE for use in the NRS. This will be a costly and lengthy process, so other options are being explored for both the traditional classroom and for distance learning.

For distance students, the pilot agencies have been able to get pre-tests during intake at orientation. However, getting the students to return for posttesting is challenging. The pilot sites are now in the process of seeing if they can use the portfolios with distance learners to determine if their distance learners can meet the same standards used as benchmarks with classroom learners. In hybrid programs where there is some face-to-face interaction with the students, agencies are reporting that they *are* able to collect

evidence of work for students' portfolios. The evidence is less definitive for learners who work completely at a distance and have no face-to-face contact with an instructor. This raises questions about the usefulness of keeping portfolios on students working solely at a distance, unless modifications can be made on what to consider acceptable items to include in the portfolio (e.g., can online work be used as evidence of achievement or competence?)

Pennsylvania

A primary goal in the third year of Pennsylvania's Distance Learning Project was to make recommendations for policy on performance standards for agencies serving distance learners. In its first two years, the project funded 20 pilot sites to use Workplace Essential Skills (WES) at a distance. In its third year, agencies applied for funding to add GED Connection for use at a distance and/or TV411 as a classroom-based, preparatory curriculum for distance learning. The task of the project that year was to answer the questions, "Can distance learners meet the same standards as classroom learners, and, if not, what should the recommendations be for performance standards for 2003-04?"

Based on input from a focus group of pilot site administrators and an advisory committee of project stakeholders, it was decided only to pilot test standards for learners studying the WES curriculum. The rationale was that WES students do not fit the profile of adult learners upon whom the existing performance standards are based. The performance targets were based on statewide data of classroom-based, adult basic education students. Early research on the WES students indicates that they differ from most classroom students in that they do not have goals related to educational achievement. Instead, they tend to have short-term goals related to job searches and/or the workplace. Also, standardized assessments are not a good match for testing the knowledge and skills taught in the WES employment and communication strands.⁵ Therefore, in 2003-04, WES distance students were exempted from meeting performance targets for classroom learners and NRS data was tracked in Project IDEAL Seat Time Logs. This will provide information upon which to base future recommendations for standards and policy.

New York

As noted previously, New York has a structure that incorporates distance learning into the broader range of adult education offerings in the state. They do not offer "pure" distance, but require that the students come to an agency for intake, pre-testing, goal setting and the development of an Individual Education Plan (IEP). The funding formula provides a stable source of monies for distance learning programs while establishing requirements for student and teacher activity and documentation. The funding formulas place distance-learning programs into one of two models based upon primary mode of teacher-student interaction (mail or phone). Currently students studying online curricula

⁵ See Johnston, J., (2003). *Accountability In Adult Education For Learners Studying At A Distance (Working Paper 2)*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research. Available online at <http://projectideal.org>

are supported and funded using the phone model, but the state is examining ways of including Internet-based support of learners.

From the States' Perspective: Federal Support

State directors want the latitude to discover who they should be serving at a distance and how best to do that. But they would also like guidance from the federal government in the following areas. Some of the state directors would like clearer definitions and guidelines from OVAE for carrying out distance learning experiments. For example, at the state level, they need to set target numbers for distance learners and be clear about which students are “experimental” and part of the research process and which students can be reported for accountability purposes. Because the state directors were feeling varying degrees of pressure to count distance students in the National Reporting System, some of their requests for support focused on that need.

In thinking about integrating distance learning into their regular adult education options, states were interested in OVAE’s perceptions of acceptable methods of including distance learners in the NRS. North Carolina would like help in developing alternatives to standardized testing for distance learners, such as computer-based testing that would meet accountability requirements. New York was concerned about the development of valid and reliable assessments that could be administered online and at distance.

State directors also felt that the federal government might play a role in helping the field of adult education identify and access the most appropriate technologies for their learners. State directors commented on the rapid technology changes occurring and the challenge in staying current. One example of this is the growth of high-definition television (HDTV) that has the potential to allow students to access adult education programs 24 hours a day, seven days a week. To maximize the educational value, it will be necessary to develop a student management system and educators will need to learn to use data casting and other aspects of the new HD technology. As a result, the states suggested the need for federal support in the development and training for effective educational use of these new technology tools.

States also suggested other, longer-term initiatives that the federal government might support including:

- Help in understanding more about the large proportion of adults not currently receiving services (what are their demographics and characteristics, how are they different from classroom learners, what are their unique learning needs, etc.);
- Help with determining how to “count quality” in assessing programs and a recognition that both qualitative and quantitative data are important.

The state directors who were interviewed are carefully considering policy options that will provide guidelines for agencies that offer distance learning. This paper has initiated an important dialogue among them and others who attended the 2004 COABE National Conference.

From the National Perspective: Access and Options

From a federal perspective, increasing access to literacy and basic skills services and adding options for adult learners are two important issues. Distance education is not intended to replace classroom instruction. Rather, it is seen as one possible approach to reach adults who cannot, or will not, attend existing programs. It can provide access to learners who have barriers—lack of childcare or transportation or conflicting job schedules—to participating in traditional classroom programs, and it expands the options for how an adult chooses to learn. States have the responsibility to develop a system that will support learning beyond conventional, face-to-face instruction. Federal policy makers are discussing a system—and policy in support of the system—in the United States that provides multiple options at many levels (ABE, GED, ESL) for adults in different phases of life that fit with their goals and lifestyles.

Four issues emerge from this vision of how distance education can expand access and options for adult learners. These issues will need to be addressed so that resources, policies and systems can be put in place to support distance education. The process will require policy development as well as removal of policy barriers at both national and state levels.

Experimentation

In order to learn about the potential of distance education to meet the needs of adult basic learners it is necessary to experiment with this educational approach. State experiments need to answer such questions as: How do we actually serve this population of adult learners using distance technology? What teaching strategies are most effective? What support systems are needed? What learner characteristics describe successful distance learners? Experimentation is needed to answer these questions. Findings from programs experimenting with distance learning will help determine if distance learning is a realistic alternative and will provide the foundation of knowledge on which to base policy decisions.

Parity

If experimentation demonstrates that distance learning is viable for adults with basic skill needs, then states need to develop service delivery structures to support distance learning in the same way they support classroom learning. Both state and national policy would need to address such issues as funding, accountability, ways to learn about best practices and professional development for teachers and administrators. Plans to incorporate distance learning into the adult education framework of the state would need to be

developed and distance education programs would need to be funded and supported in the same way other state adult programs are.

Curriculum Development / Partnerships

The third issue is the development of relevant products and materials for use in distance education. Important questions are: Who supports that development effort? What roles do OVAE, state departments of education and the private sector play? How do you make sure the products fill the curricular gaps? How far does OVAE or the states go in supporting use of new technologies? How far do they go in funding cutting-edge technology given the needs of the population—or do they support more accessible, low tech initiatives?

A key will be to determine what kinds of partnerships are necessary at the national level to advance the development of distance curricular products. Many distance products in use today were produced by leveraging both state and federal monies. However, other options such as direct investment or providing incentives for the creation of partnerships also exist. Federal policy makers see a need to develop a strategy for partnership development.

Technology

Another important issue for the federal government is whether policy for funding technology development in adult education and literacy should be the same as, or different from, K-12 funding of technology. Linking the technology initiatives for adult basic education to the Office of Educational Technology and maintaining a focus on the specific needs of adults with basic skill needs are two goals the federal officials would like to pursue.

What Policy is Needed?

In the previous discussion of policy issues, there were implications for both national and state-level policies. There are also indicators that there is an appropriate sequence to policy development. Some issues need to be addressed in the early phase as states transition from experimentation to adoption. These include funding and accountability. Others are long-term and will require commitment from multiple stakeholders for policy to be developed and implemented. For example, determining how to tie adult education technology policy to existing educational policy initiatives is a complicated, long-term issue. It will require partnership creation, resource allocation and decisions about the development of, and access to, technology in order to reach some percentage of the adults not now being served.

Short-term issues warrant more immediate attention. Funding is a critical, state level issue. States must decide how much of a limited pool of basic education and literacy dollars should be allocated to distance learning. The decision should be based, in part, on the outcomes of their distance learning experiments and the value that distance learning

adds to overall offerings in adult education. States need to track the educational gains of distance learners, but, at this early stage, funding should *not* be dependent on distance learners meeting the same performance targets as classroom learners. Distance learning should not be set up in opposition to classroom learning, but rather provided as one of several approaches available to serve learners' needs. States need to verify that distance learning is, in fact, expanding access and options for adult students to learn and then fund programs accordingly.

Accountability, on the other hand, is a significant issue for both the states and the federal government. *If* distance program outcomes are comparable to the classroom, and *if* distance learners progress similarly through education levels, *then* the framework for accountability should be the same. However, *if* states find that goals and outcomes for distance learners are different, *then* a federal policy that calls for a different kind of accountability may be most appropriate.

Perceived Barriers: Federal and State Responsibilities

During conversations with the federal and state officials, it became evident that some existing policies or procedures are perceived as barriers to distance learning experiments becoming mainstream activities. Some of the key issues are discussed below.

Performance Targets. Whether distance programs should meet performance targets is perceived to be a state, not national issue. States receive federal funding based on census data. States do not lose funding based on whether or not they meet performance targets. (However, if they do not meet targets, they cannot apply for incentive grants.) As states have positive outcomes from their distance learning experiments and want to go to scale, it raises the accountability issue for distance learners. To the extent that the percentage of adult learners studying at a distance is small relative to the pool of all adult learners, including distance students in NRS reporting will have little effect on performance goals. However, this approach will not be effective should distance learning students become a larger proportion of a state's adult learner pool. Information gained from state distance learning experiments may provide guidance to policy makers at both the state and federal levels about what performance targets are most appropriate for adult distance learners.

NRS Guidelines. A crucial question is whether the current NRS guidelines are appropriate for distance learners, and, if not, what guidelines should be included in the NRS for distance learners. The challenge is to create a reporting system that ensures accountability while acknowledging the realities of serving distance learners. Critical policy questions revolve around such issues as seat time, pre- and posttesting, and sufficient instructional time for distance students to show educational gains.

Creativity vs. Accountability: Effective experiments need to strike a balance between operating in an environment that fosters creativity and innovation and one that ensures accountability. States need to create a culture that values innovation and in which programs can examine the challenges of using distance education with adult basic

learners. In order for adult education providers to feel comfortable fully engaging in experimental projects, it may be necessary to temporarily suspend or modify accountability requirements.

Conclusions

As states explore how distance learning can expand options for adult learners in their states, policies will serve several functions. They will serve as “levers” that create incentives and disincentives for how agencies serving distance learners can and cannot proceed. They also will shape organizational activity in three primary ways:

- Policies control how resources are allocated;
- Policies establish rules and regulations to guide the actions of agencies;
- Policies create reporting systems that establish accountability for actions⁶

Thus, it is important that policies about distance education for adult students be well grounded in the practice of the programs that serve these learners. Interviews with several state directors and federal officials suggest key issues that will impact the development of policy for distance education for adult basic learners. They include:

- *Experimentation.* Both the state and national discussions emphasized the importance of experiments that provide information about using distance education with adult learners. States should consider the continued support of experiments that allow them to explore whether distance learning is an effective option for the learners they serve. Experiments should start with targets of small, controlled numbers of distance learners so states get valid and reliable data. The findings of these experiments can be used to help develop policy with a firm foundation in practice.
- *Innovation.* Because distance education differs considerably from classroom-based education, it requires creative approaches. Agencies experimenting with distance education need to think differently about how they deliver their services, how they support students and how teachers teach. In order to facilitate this approach, states need to create an “atmosphere of innovation.” To encourage agencies to take risks and think creatively, states should

⁶ AT&T Foundation. (1998). *Innovations In Distance Education: Distance Education And The University Culture*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University.

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- consider exempting portions of programs experimenting with distance learning programs from meeting performance targets during the experimental period. Likewise, federal polices need to support state-level initiatives that stimulate such innovative approaches.
- *Accountability.* Accountability remains one of the most challenging aspects of implementing distance learning programs for adult basic learners. Decisions will need to be made about how to include distance learners in the NRS, how to count seat time for students who do not physically occupy a classroom seat and how to use assessment as an instructional tool for distance learners. The state experiments should be able to provide data to help guide these decisions.
 - *Understanding the distance learning population.* A goal for many distance education efforts is to better understand the students they serve at a distance as well as reach out to adults not currently served by existing programs. While adult educators know a great deal about the classroom students they serve (e.g., demographics, educational goals), they do not have the same knowledge about the distance learning population they are beginning to serve or hope to attract with this new educational approach. Understanding who distance learners are and why they chose distance learning is needed to both design appropriate educational programs and to develop policies for those programs.
 - *Understanding the role of the distance teacher.* Competent instructors are the key to successful distance learning programs but state directors are just beginning to understand what is required to be a distance teacher. Distance teachers spend different amounts of time recruiting, orienting and teaching students than do their classroom counterparts, and they need different skills to communicate and teach content effectively. These changes in time and activities will require a rethinking of policy with regard to compensation and staff development.
 - *Product and technology development.* The development of both distance learning curricula and the technology to deliver distance learning are long range goals that will involve the development of partnerships and require considerable resources. The federal office can play a major role in bringing together the major stakeholders and stimulating these development activities.

As the states learn more about the ways in which they can effectively add distance learning to the services they provide for adult learners, they also create a firmer foundation for both state and federal policy.

Next Steps

In conclusion, through carefully planned experiments states are learning more about the ways in which they can effectively add distance learning to the services they provide for adult learners. They have shown that it is a viable delivery option for at least some kinds of basic education students. However, they have also discovered that distance learning means change—changes in the role of teachers, changes in expectations of students, and changes in accountability for agencies that offer distance learning. Therefore the policies that provide guidelines and support for classroom-based programs are not always adequate to define the same kind of parameters for distance learning programs. Unique policies are needed to provide guidelines for how states—and agencies within those states—administer, allocate resources and are held accountable for distance learning programs. Toward that end, Project IDEAL proposes a three-part strategy for developing policy recommendations for key issues in distance education by April 2005.

First, Project IDEAL Support Center will monitor and document the states' distance learning efforts as part of their on-going research effort. These data will provide additional insights into the implementation and maintenance of distance learning programs and will be useful as a basis for formulating policies. For example, some of the policy issues raised in this paper revolve around the amount of time distance students spend on their studies. The Support Center will collect additional seat time and achievement data that will help illuminate this issue. In addition, the Center will continue to explore various policy options that are being considered in both the five states included in this paper and in other states in the consortia. At least two additional states will be addressing the need for policy to support distance learning in their states in the coming year.

Second, the Support Center will research distance policy in other fields of education. It may be that in K-12 or higher education there are policy models that can inform the efforts in ABE.

Finally, the Support Center will coordinate a consensus-building process to solicit input from OVAE staff, state directors and consortia members, culminating in a policy symposium in March 2005. During this event, participants will discuss, draft and finalize policy recommendations that will be presented at the COABE National Conference in April 2005. The COABE conference will provide an arena for further discussion, ensuring a broad base of support for recommendations that may have impact at the national level.