

## How to be a Distance Learner

If the idea of getting a college degree by sitting in front of your home computer appeals to you, or if you just don't have the ability to take a class because of your work schedule, consider becoming a distance learner.

Although distance learning has been around for a long time, the Internet has given it new meaning. Computer technology offers a real solution for those who can't afford the time and the money needed to sit in a classroom and follow a traditional college schedule. Today, lectures can be assessed via streaming video, class notes can be quickly downloaded, and classmates can be contacted through e-mail, Weblogs, and chat rooms.

But beware: Learning in the comfort of your own home can actually be tougher than a trip to the campus. "Being a distance learner is not easy," says Robert Rosenbalm, marketing director for Dallas County Community College District. "I tried it myself. It requires more discipline than traditional classroom learning because you don't have an instructor making sure you've finished the assignment every week. It is easy to get to the middle of the semester and find you are four assignments short."

Despite the drawbacks, there also are real advantages to distance learning:

- You don't have to commute—and you don't have to search for a parking spot;
- You can take classes according to your schedule;
- You can get a degree while working full-time or fulfilling family obligations;
- You can save money—distance learning is less expensive, and you won't have to purchase books because the material is posted online.

"A lot of distance learners are older and don't want to come to class with 18-year-olds," Mr. Rosenbalm says. "Women outnumber men in taking distance learning courses. The largest group of distance learners is women 28 to 34 years old."

Distance courses are particularly beneficial to those with limited mobility or few transportation options, such as disabled people or the elderly. If you're still unsure about distance learning, he recommends taking a single course as a trial run. "DCCD offers two associate degrees entirely by distance learning—associate degrees in liberal arts and business," Mr. Rosenbalm says. "More than 20,000 students took online courses this semester. DCCCD has been offering distance learning since 1972. It offers 250 different courses. About 20 to 25 percent of the 60,000-plus students in DCCCD are taking courses by distance learning. You'll never know if it's right for you unless you give it a try."

Some employers pay for courses that apply to the employee's job. At the very least, the education can help if you're angling for a promotion. Ask your supervisor or human resources representative what your company does to help employees continue their education.

Make sure you take a course from a recognized institution. Some employers may be skeptical of a degree obtained online, thinking it could have been purchased through a "diploma mill". But the fact that most public universities now offer online classes has removed much of that stigma.