

# Distance Administration of Distance Staff



Thomas J. Tobin  
University of Wisconsin-Madison  
[dr.tobin@att.net](mailto:dr.tobin@att.net)

---

## Abstract

Since the late 1990s, internet-based distance-education programs have attracted students and instructors who could be geographically distributed: they could learn and teach from anywhere. However, the model for the staff who support distance-education programs was overwhelmingly the traditional place-based office with co-located physical and human resources. The idea of the campus as the physical location where services are literally housed was slow to shift to a distributed-workforce model until the COVID-19 pandemic forced an emergency shift to remote instruction and remote support services, starting in early 2020.

While there have been a few colleges and universities whose distance-education staff were intentionally flexible, hybrid, or agnostic regarding the physical location of work, far more of our programs remain stuck within larger institutional contexts, policies, and expectations that the work of the campus must take place on the campus. This article outlines the history of distributed work in higher education, shares models for shifting from co-located to hybrid and fully remote units, offers tips for how to manage such arrangements, lists ways to attract and keep remote distance-education staff members, and suggests policy and infrastructure needs that support successful remote-staff units.

### The Evolution of the Distributed Academic Workforce

Over the history of distance education, our assumptions about how distance-education programs are offered have shifted from an exclusively distributed model (Freese & Frączek, 2019) to a broadcast model (Johnston, 2020) to a hybrid-distributed model (Maloney & Kim, 2021).

The very earliest postal-delivery-based distance education programs in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were distributed: the learners could be located anywhere, and instructors and supporting staff members could also work from various locations. The constant locus for such distance-education programs was the postal address where the instructor received materials from remote learners (Perry & Rumble, 1987, p. 6)—usually but not exclusively at the college or university campus. This model persisted until and co-existed with early technology-mediated models well into the twentieth century, until the broadcast model of distance education supplanted it.

Beginning in the 1930s with radio-broadcast and eventually television-broadcast technologies, distance education became a broadcast model on one end of the interaction, with colleges and universities investing in radio and TV airtime, studios, talent, and staff members (Diehl, 2012, p. 43). The other end of the interaction was still usually postal: learners listened to or watched lessons, worked on problem sets and practiced independently of the instructor, and mailed their work back to the central location (again usually a college or university campus) for feedback from the instructor or distance-education team. The thing to note about broadcast models, for the purpose of this research, is that they replaced only a part of the distributed interaction with a need for centralized staff, equipment, and instructors.

With the advent of widespread personal computing devices in the late 1990s—and accelerated by the tipping point in 2014 of more people owning Internet-enabled mobile phones than laptop and desktop computers (StatCounter, 2022), distance education shifted away from broadcast to a hybrid-distributed model. Like in the earliest days of postal-correspondence courses, everyone involved in the creation, support, and execution of learning interactions can now again be located anywhere independent of campus facilities—learners, instructors, support staff, and administrators.

Our collective response to the COVID-19 pandemic helped to shift the perception of the necessity of co-located services across college and university campuses. As recently as January, 2020, the higher-education press was reporting on the widespread concern that “telecommuting will lead to lower levels of team creativity (or outright shirking)” (Kim, 2020). For campuses that were, until recently, focused on keeping staff members physically present in the bricks-and-mortar expressions of our institutions, the pandemic was an unplanned demonstration that the portion of staff members who must be on campus to be effective is relatively small—and that many staff members saw their productivity, reach, and effectiveness *increase* during their stint as remote staffers (cf. Zackal, 2021).

The experience of supporting emergency remote instruction during the pandemic has largely evaporated the suspicion that work-from-home equals the chance to slack off. Indeed, we collectively kept our Slack channels on: in the early months of 2020, distance-education teams led the way in shifting untold numbers of sections of face-to-face courses to remote-live formats, largely from improvised home offices during quarantine. Remote-work policies are now starting to catch up to this reality.

For example, the Pennsylvania State University recently announced that, beginning in the Fall 2022 semester, new policy will allow unit-level supervisors to approve permanent fully- and partly-remote staff roles (PSU Human Resources, 2022). Especially with distance-education programs, where learners and instructors were already assumed to be distributed geographically, there is now a growing recognition that permanent remote-work positions, whether fully remote or flexibly co-located, are increasingly going to be part of the higher-education workplace situation (Lederman, 2022).

So, how do we, as distance-learning administrators, smoothly and intelligently shift our operations to include remote staff members who may never set foot in our campus offices? This article outlines three key issues and recommends approaches and practices for each: attracting remote staff members (from existing or new sources), the everyday management of remote and blended remote/in-person teams, and creating the long-term support environment for remote distance-learning staff members.

### **Managing Distant Staff Members Should Be Easy, Except . . .**

Before we consider the three key issues for the distance administration of remote staff members, there is a central tension that deserves consideration. Just as we experienced challenges in the late 1990s and early 2000s when some of our learners and instructors first went online while the majority of them were still learning and teaching in physical classrooms, we will likely experience a liminal period where remote staff work will feel “special” and “apart from” the everyday patterns we have established.

Distance-education support teams are often in a unique position among campus units, in that we serve instructors and students who do not necessarily need to be on campus—and who are explicitly supposed to be distant from our physical campus locations, whether that is measured in miles or blocks. This makes it tempting to campus leaders to establish separate policies and practices for distance education, but that creates its own roadblocks.

Colleges and universities who established separate governance structures for online programs—e.g., the Penn State World Campus (2022) and Colorado State University CSU Global (2022) models—are now finding themselves behind others, administratively, whose online programs were intentionally integrated into their overall suite of course, service, and support offerings from the beginning—programs like those at Southern New Hampshire University (2022) and most community colleges found an easier transition to flexible outreach and support as their student demographic diversified and grew beyond their traditional geographical service areas.

This suggests that treating remote staff members on our distance-learning teams as being in a “special” circumstance or creating separate policy just for remote staffing will be less effective in the long term than adjusting current policies and practices to fold remote positions into the mix of options for effective individual and team work.

Managing distant staff member should be easy . . . if all of our unit’s staff members are fully and permanently remote. Our biggest challenge as distance-learning program administrators is that most of us are juggling hybrid staffing as we collectively come “back to campus”: some staffers are on campus full time, others continue to work remotely, and others are flexible, with some days on campus and some remote (or a regular or irregular schedule of both modalities). So, the first question to answer is “what staff and unit roles can be fully remote, can be hybrid, and must be co-located?”

### **Attracting Remote Distance-Education Staff**

For distance-education support units, the types of roles that must be co-located are few: information-technology staff who keep the on-campus servers running are usually the only on-ground staff members who cannot do their work effectively from off-campus locations. Just about everything else—office support, instructional design, educational consulting, student advising, curriculum support, front-line management, and divisional leadership—was shifted to remote work starting early 2020, and we now have more than two years of evidence that such work can happen effectively and well from a distance.

We’ve trained our staff and instructors about how to work remotely. Technology training is now widespread for systems like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and the Google suite of distributed tools. We’re also collectively norming remote-work processes, such as how to have water-cooler conversations via back-channel tools like Teams or Slack, and how to manage our time effectively as we work from our kitchen tables with our laptops and mobile phones (Ellis, 2021). So, how do we honor our existing staff’s desire for flexibility while also attracting new talent to our teams from beyond our usual geographies?

In a recent national survey, staff members of distance-education units ranked the reasons they would consider joining a new team. The top five reasons were

flexible schedule,  
intellectual stimulation,  
opportunity to develop competencies,  
enhancing my professional career, and  
money. (Taylor, 2020)

Intriguingly, while pay rate was in the top five for most respondents, it was almost never first or second on the list: intrinsic benefits that have to do with “fit” and a sense of impact for the work being done were always the leading reasons for working with a new team.

The recent “great resignation” trend sees academic staff members leaving higher education for jobs in industry that are more flexible and pay better, at least according to the “quit lit” rhetoric on various social media. Fully remote work has been floated as a possible remedy to the brain-drain: Josie Ahlquist suggests that many campus leaders are afraid of losing the campus identities that they had built pre-pandemic:

Deep down, could campuses be scared? Not of COVID-19, but from not being a campus anymore. This change in how we deliver services is far too significant to stomach. If we do not physically fill our buildings, classrooms, and offices—are we even a campus anymore? (Ahlquist, 2022)

Our distance-education programs and support units have a metaphorical ace up our sleeves: we’ve been advocates for a different sense of belonging and mode of identity formation for decades, now: especially with institutions whose online programs have been around for a while, the way we define being “a part of” the academic community (as opposed to “apart from” it) has to do with access to services rather than social-interaction-based conversations.

The same can and should be true for our unit staff members. In order to attract and retain remote staff members to our distance-education units, we should use similar logic and practices to those we employ in marketing to learners and to new instructors: “institutions should focus on empowering their workforce to operate safely, securely, and effectively in a remote environment” (Fahey, 2021). Job descriptions in recent advertisements emphasize the benefits of flexible scheduling, lack of a commute, access to benefits wherever staff live, and a strong community of practice among staff members.

### **Managing Remote and Mixed-Location Distance-Education Staff**

If you’re able to create a 100% remote staff unit for your distance-education support team, congratulations. You’re in a very small minority of units at colleges and universities. Most of us are wrangling with how best to manage, support, and strengthen the work of teams composed of staff members who were hired into place-bound roles, alongside colleagues whose work agreements are more flexible or are fully remote from the beginning.

The most immediate needs for distance-learning administrators have to do with time, accountability, team cohesion, and work coverage.

**Time:** For some campus leaders, the worry about remote staffing is that “permanent flexibility would hinder staff productivity” (Ivey, 2021). While it is true that the pandemic-emergency version of remote work caused a dip in overall work effort, this signal runs counter to the experiences of remote-staff units that predate the pandemic: productivity tends to go *up* across all academic roles where staff members have flexible or permanently remote positions (Rimer, 2021).

Define the business hours when everyone on the team should be available, and whether any team members are working on flexible or shifted hours. For instance, having remote staff members who are in different time zones and can cover access needs for the team is a plus for distance-education programs that attract international learners. Likewise, some roles don’t require employees to be at their posts continuously during set business hours. However, there should be at least some hours in the work week when the entire team is available, reachable, and able to connect with one another.

**Accountability.** In the in-person office, 50% or more of available work time in a traditional eight-hour day is spent in meetings, conversations with colleagues, short breaks, checking social media, and other quasi-work or non-work tasks (Wade, 2019). While this is true for remote staff members, as well, the expectation of productivity should not be different for remote staff members.

Avoid employee-monitoring processes and using workforce-analytics data (McCandless, 2020) for remote staff members if you’re not also using such tools for your co-located staff. For most distance-education program staff members, the expectation is that salaried professionals will put in the work that is needed to accomplish the projects and goals of the unit.

Negotiate and document how time spent away from work is handled. How should family-care needs, short trips to the doctor’s office, and other less-than-a-workday activities be documented (if at all) with sick, vacation, or personal time? What is the smallest unit of time that must be accounted for this way? Can individual staff members just make up two hours in the middle of the day by working for two hours in the evening, without needing to use the formal human-resources system for tracking time away from work? For instance, at my university, anything under two hours is left to the professional discretion of the staff member, and sick, vacation, and personal time are taken in 4-hour or 8-hour increments.

**Social and team cohesion.** Having some hours during the work week when all unit staff are available and accessible to one another and to clients (instructors, students, campus administrators) is more than just a time-management technique, but one that adds to the sense of community and social cohesion among members of the team.

Administrators should ensure that fully remote staff members have opportunities to be part of the culture of the unit or team. Creating purposefully unstructured “water cooler” conversations via remote tools like Zoom (Jorstad, 2021), asking all staff to identify a predictable weekly time for engagement (Ivey, 2021), and establishing a

common hour or two that all staff hold for unit meetings and conversations (Ahlquist, 2022)—all of these strategies help to build the sense of camaraderie and teamwork that mark healthy units.

### **Long-Term Support for Remote Distance-Education Staff**

In the long term, we can contribute to the success of our remote staff units by paying attention to the needs of remote employees around five key areas: policy, human resources, information technology, administration, and collaboration.

**Policy Support.** Remote work is made easier when the entire institution recognizes that some categories of labor are not fundamentally timed either to the campus or to the traditional workday. Work with your campus administration, human-resources team, and staff advocacy groups to craft policy that formally recognizes flexible and permanently-remote work as acceptable ways to be a part of the college or university staff. For instance, the University of Rochester updated its policies to add a specific section on remote work (2021).

Barring specific policy updates—which can be contentious and can take a long time to craft, deliberate, and implement—create formal pathways for unit-level directors and managers to establish non-precedent-setting arrangements for their teams and for individuals and roles within them. Freeing line-level administrators to make decisions about the best way for work to be accomplished expands the number of cases that can be used for later policy development, especially if such moves are exempted from having precedent-setting impact during transitional periods.

**Human resource support.** Remote staff members often run into challenges around the benefits packages offered by colleges and universities. For staff members who live in different counties, different states, and even different countries than their employers, health insurance, dental, vision, and even banking networks must be negotiated individually. Work with your campus leaders and human resources team to examine the scope of in-network benefits offered to employees, and consider either joining nationwide provider networks for benefits or creating a remote-staff package of benefits with nationwide coverage.

Further, train your human-resources staff to be knowledgeable about the needs and challenges of remote-work staff members. Especially for hourly staff members on your distance-education teams, human resources teams must think differently when it comes to performance assessment:

- - Reexamination of performance. Even when your employees are on campus, managers and other leadership don't stand over employees the entire time. Instead, higher education human resources is redirecting leadership to examine performance metrics differently than simple "hours worked" models.
  - New software for human resources. Accessing systems, including time tracking, is a critical component of remote work. HR departments are adopting more robust human resources technology to help track hours and manage performance, giving employees greater access to the systems they have while on campus.
  - Robust guidance for "hours worked" policies. Higher education human resources is now providing detailed outlines of what hours worked means, giving employees more explicit parameters while they're at home. It defines schedules, including breaks and mealtimes, and identifies starting and ending hours.
  - Stricter overtime controls. Teaching may involve off the clock hours, but nonexempt staff support shouldn't. HR is developing stricter controls for overtime, defining parameters to reduce abuse and misunderstandings. Many times, these policies are designed [in collaboration] with the targeted staff. (PeopleAdmin, 2022)

**Information-technology support.** Remote staff members are often working from home networks and on personally-owned devices that our IT teams are not tasked with supporting. Work with your campus leaders and IT directors to establish inventory control systems for sending institution-owned assets such as laptops, headsets, and video monitors to remote staff members. "Additional technologies and protocols may be necessary since not all devices will be connected to the network on a regular basis, which may be essential to push patches to computers" (Fahey, 2021).

Further, secure access to campus systems is a must. The virtual private network (VPN) and two-factor authentication systems that many campuses put in place during the pandemic can serve as robust practices to help remote staff members to tunnel into resources securely. The same goes for licenses or access to collaboration, productivity, and other work-suite tools. Will your campus support software installed on personally-owned machines, for instance? How can remote staffers report problems, get help from support teams, and who pays for shipping if equipment needs to be repaired or replaced? These are all discussions that lead to long-term IT-support success with remote-staff teams.

**Administrative support.** one of the chief frustrations among remote staff members is a lack of planned administrative support. In most co-located work units, teams that report through a single person are supported by an office manager, secretary, or other workflow-managing person. Especially because remote staff members lack the spontaneous “hallway conversations” that in-person colleagues can have in order to clarify, adjust, and collaborate, it’s key to include the admin-support role for remote employees. Someone who can assist with reporting, data collection, outreach, work coverage, intentional collaboration/conversation opportunities, and general project management—such a role helps staff members to focus on their work rather than on the calendar-management tasks that too many of us had to take on individually during the emergency remote situation in the two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Long term, remote staff members in distance-education programs need to rely more on the services of a competent office manager or team of support personnel than their in-person colleagues might.

**Collaborative support.** We are already familiar with the types of communication loops, patterns, and needs of distance-learning students and instructors. The same types of lessons we’ve learned in supporting them can be applied to our support for remote employees, whether they are working alongside co-located teammates or our entire teams are permanently remote. Because of the lack of informal and unplanned water-cooler moments, we should build in purposeful ways for remote staff to stay informed, connect with colleagues in unstructured ways, and provide feedback and ideas to their coworkers, clients, and us administrators. These purposeful communication and collaboration systems can take many forms, such as Slack channels, Teams groups, shared Google files, and time set aside during live meetings and conversations.

## **Conclusion**

As remote work become more common among higher education units, we in distance learning can lead the conversation because of how we are positioned in the life of our campuses. The Rutgers University Future of Work Task Force asked all employees at the university to help define what work looks like in the future at Rutgers: “Our goal is to create a caring, inclusive, and respectful work environment, where employees are engaged, productive, valued, and rewarded for their contributions” (2022).

Much of what they learned from their town halls, surveys, and listening tours reflected practices that were already common in their distance-learning teams. Chief among the concerns of remote staff members was wanting to be seen and valued as contributors to the work of the institution: “You can give your team all the flexibility, independence, and remote possibilities—but if you aren’t fully seeing and valuing them, you’re doing it wrong” (Ahlquist, 2022).

Full disclosure: I have been a fully remote staff member at the University of Wisconsin-Madison since 2017. I live in central Pennsylvania, where my partner is a faculty member at Penn State. The biggest reason I wrote this piece is that in most cases, I have had to advocate on my own behalf to implement many of the conversations, practices, policies, and agreements that you’ve just read about.

As administrators, we should be as proactive as possible to create a welcoming and supportive environment for all of our employees. Beyond just attracting talent from outside our ordinarily geographically limited talent pools, taking steps to be ready to nurture the talents of our existing staff with remote-work options is a business-continuation practice that will pay us back many-fold in increased employee retention and satisfaction.

## **References**

Ahlquist, J. (2022). Can remote work save higher ed from the great resignation?

<https://www.josieahlquist.com/2022/03/03/can-remote-work-save-higher-ed-from-the-great-resignation/>.

Colorado State University. (2022). *CSU Global*. <https://learn.csuglobal.edu/>.

Diehl, W. (2012). Charles A. Wedemeyer: Visionary pioneer of distance education. In *Handbook of Distance Education*. London, UK: Routledge.

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/pdf/doi/10.4324/9780203803738.ch3>.

Ellis, L. (2021). At some colleges, remote work could be here to stay. *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

<https://www.chronicle.com/article/at-some-colleges-remote-work-could-be-here-to-stay>

Fahey, K. (2021). Higher ed and remote working: How to enable a secure and effective remote workforce. *Collegis Education*. <https://collegiseducation.com/news/technology/fully-remote-higher-ed-workforce/>.

Freese, R. & Frączek, I. (2019). A history of correspondence course programs. *Resources for Independent Learning Instructors* blog. University of Wisconsin-Madison.

<https://courses.dcs.wisc.edu/wp/ilinstructors/2019/07/25/a-history-of-correspondence-course-programs/>.

Ivey, J. A. B. (2021). How will higher ed work? *Volt*. <https://voltedu.com/education-administration/how-will-higher-ed-work/>

Johnston, J. P. (2020). Creating better definitions of distance learning. *Online Journals of Distance Learning Administration*, 23(2). <https://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/summer232/johnston232.html>.

Jorstad, J. A. (2021). Can remote work actually work for IT in higher ed? *Government Technology*.

<https://www.govtech.com/education/higher-ed/can-remote-work-actually-work-for-it-in-higher-ed>

Kim, J. (2020). Online Education and the War Against Remote work. *Inside Higher Ed*.

<https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/learning-innovation/online-education-and-war-against-remote-work>.

Lederman, D. (2022). The era of flexible work in higher education. *Inside Higher Ed*.

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/01/05/era-flexible-work-higher-education-has-begun>.

Maloney, E. & Kim, J. (2021). 3 questions for Adam Croom on OU's now fully remote office of digital learning. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/learning-innovation/3-questions-adam-croom-ou%E2%80%99s-now-fully-remote-office-digital-learning>.

McCandless, K. (2020). How to use workforce analytics in your organization. *Motley Fool Blueprint* series.

<https://www.fool.com/the-blueprint/workforce-analytics/>.

The Pennsylvania State University. (2022). *World Campus*. <https://www.worldcampus.psu.edu/>.

PeopleAdmin. (2022). *The Future of Remote Work in Higher Education*. <https://peopleadmin.com/2020/08/the-future-of-remote-work-in-higher-education/>.

Perry, W. & Rumble, G. (1987). *A short guide to distance education*. Cambridge, UK: International Extension College. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED290872.pdf>

PSU Human Resources. (2022). University updates community on flexible work arrangements for staff. *Human Resources News* blog. Pennsylvania State University. <https://www.psu.edu/news/human-resources/story/university-updates-community-flexible-work-arrangements-staff/>.

Rimer, S. (2021). How BU's remote work policy is changing lives. Boston University Today. <https://www.bu.edu/articles/2021/bu-remote-work-policy-is-changing-lives/>.

Rutgers University (2022). Help us discover the future of work. *Future of Work Task Force*. <https://uhr.rutgers.edu/future-of-work/task-force-overview>.

Southern New Hampshire University. (2022). *SNHU*. <https://www.snhu.edu/>.

StatCounter. (2022). *Desktop vs Mobile vs Tablet Market Share Worldwide*. <https://gs.statcounter.com/platform-market-share/desktop-mobile-tablet>

Taylor, A. (2020). What do remote adjunct faculty look for in an institution? In Dailey-Hebert, A., Mandernach, B. J., & Donnelly-Sallee, E. (Eds.) *Handbook of Research on Inclusive Development for Remote Adjunct Faculty in Higher Education*. Hershey, PA: IGI Global (pp.71-84).

University of Rochester. (2021). *Remote Work Policy*. <https://www.rochester.edu/policies/policy/remote-work/>.

Wade, L. (2019). The 8-hour workday is a counterproductive lie. *Wired*. <https://www.wired.com/story/eight-hour-workday-is-a-lie/>.

Zackal, J. (2021). Remote work is more of a possibility beyond the pandemic. *Higher Ed Jobs* blog. <https://www.higheredjobs.com/Articles/articleDisplay.cfm?ID=2600>.

This site is a collaborative effort between [USG eCampus](#) and the [University of West Georgia](#). All Rights Reserved.