

---

# Creating Better Definitions of Distance Education

---

**Jason Paul Johnston**  
University of Kentucky  
[jasonpauljohnston@uky.edu](mailto:jasonpauljohnston@uky.edu)

## Abstract

Distance education across all levels of education is growing at a rapid rate. As institutions and governments attempt to guide distance education, working definitions and their meanings conflict. Perhaps this is in part because administrators and practitioners are working from definitions that are decades-old. This paper suggests new definitions are needed to help guide and understand distance education for today. First, the current state of distance education will be highlighted, then distance education will be defined historically, then these definitions will be used to bring understanding to a current online university Title IV case. Finally, this paper offers three potential definitions for distance education: “Virtual Network Education,” “Cloned Content Education,” and “Remote Classroom Education.”

## Introduction

Some might argue that distance education, also called distance learning, has always been with us. The traveling teacher has wandered great distances since antiquity, attracting students and dispersing knowledge and wisdom. Ancient educators have used various means of transmitting their knowledge in a scroll, letter, or book. From Socrates of Ancient Greece to the Apostle Paul writing to groups of believers from exile, to itinerant preachers of the American western expansion, it is true that education has always traveled distances. Though this kind of education might go great distances, it is not always distance education. In some cases, the teacher and the learner occupy the same space and time. In distance education, there is typically a gap of space and, often, time. Technologies are employed to overcome these gaps. Traditional or common definitions, however, may no longer fully reflect today’s distance learning experience. One approach to communicating the multiplicity of distance learning experiences is the creation of new terms like “online learning,” “e-learning,” and “digital learning.” Though these expressions are increasing in use, “distance education” is still the overarching research term in education databases like ERIC and predominant in journal titles. This paper will first highlight the current state of distance education, attempt to briefly define distance education historically, use these definitions to bring understanding to a current online university Title IV case, and finally suggest how three distance education definitions might guide the work moving forward. The author’s context and research focus is higher education, though many of these concepts could be applied to K12 “virtual classrooms” and corporate e-learning environments.

## The Current State of Distance Education

Recent distance education in colleges and universities is expanding at a rapid rate. In the fall of 2018, around 3.25 million students enrolled exclusively in identified distance education courses at Title IV institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020), an increase from 3.1 million in the previous fall of 2017 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). While overall higher education enrollment was on a slight decline from 20.5 million in 2012 to 20.1 million in 2017, students enrolling exclusively in distance courses rose from 11.3% percent of students to 15.4% in the same period (Ginder et al., 2018; Lederman, 2018). The category of students who are “exclusively” enrolled in distance education helps to narrow the category, but it does not paint the whole picture. In the fall of 2017, an additional 3.5 million postsecondary students were taking at least one but not all courses online, raising the total number of students taking any online courses to 6.7 million (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). This represents almost exactly one-third of all university students. Distance education was once an alternative form of learning that is now moving into the mainstream with few signs of slowing down.

## Three Eras of Distance Education

The distance education of the 1800s is quite different from current online education in several ways, but these changes were a progression. One way to organize the periods of distance education is by focusing on the technologies used. Kentnor (2015) categorized distance education into four categories defined by their delivery system: 1. Parcel Post; 2. Radio; 3. Television and; 4. Internet.

Simplifying Kentnor slightly, the eras of distance education can be loosely organized across three eras in North America by the type of courses and the delivery systems used to deliver these courses. Each era date extends to the present because each delivery method still exists in some form.

Table 1

*Distance Education Eras*

Era	Type	Delivery System	Approx. Dates
1	Correspondence courses	US Postal Service	1728-Present
2	Telecommunication courses	Radio, television, and phone	1921-Present
3	Online courses	Computers via the internet	1989-Present

Excluding cave drawings, letters from the apostles, traveling hucksters, or even Guttenberg’s press, our first historical instance of distance education in the United States begins with the “correspondence course.” The delivery and communication method was through the US postal service. Students would respond to an ad in a newspaper via mail, then receive printed materials, they would then mail back homework, and in return, students would receive a certificate of completion. The first instance was with a teacher named Caleb Philips, who offered weekly shorthand lessons to students through the mail, advertised in the Boston Gazette on March 20, 1728 (Mood, 1995). In the years that followed, distance education was not a fiercely competitive market. The next significant historical instance was not until another mail-order program, Pitman’s shorthand correspondence course in 1852. Slowly universities caught onto the trend with the University of Chicago as the first to offer correspondence studies, led by the founding president William Rainey Harper in the early 1900s (Pittman, 2008).

The next significant movement in content delivery takes us into our second era of distance education, the telecommunication course. A handful of universities in the United States were licensed to broadcast educational radio starting in 1921. These few grew to 171 licenses by 1925 and expanded into K12 as well (Haworth, & Hopkins, 2009). Of course, it was not long before telecommunications grew to include televisions in the 1950s and ’60s.

In 1974 a consortium of nine universities worked together to create a network of distributed learning through television. The purpose sounds very much like

distance learning today with a mission to “reach people interested in college education but living too far from a campus to attend classes” (Almquist, 2011, p.61). This author’s own family folklore tells of a 3-year-old Jason around 1974 getting up at 6 am to watch something in Canada called “University of the Air.” Before the years of twenty-four-hour television, these programs would fill the earliest broadcast hour with riveting lectures from Canada’s finest professors waxing eloquently on the topics of tectonic plates, the structure of sound, and the origins of textiles. Telecommunications courses progressed into some two-way communications as some schools created elaborate hardware connections with satellite campuses.

The online course identifies the third era of distance education. Though the internet was in its infancy, the first online courses were considered from CALCampus, which developed online courses between 1986 and 1995 on various telecommunication networks like AppleLink, AOL, and CompuServe (Morabito, 2018). The University of Phoenix offered the first full university program offered via the internet in 1989. This quickly became the core of the University of Phoenix’s educational delivery system as it paved the way for online education in the United States with enrollment success that public universities are still scrambling to match. In the fall of 2017, the University of Phoenix was the largest university in the US, with an enrollment of 104,000 students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018). The same year, the four largest postsecondary educational institutions in the United States primarily enrolled distance only students, with a combined enrollment of around 367,000 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). All four institutions were private, not public.

### Definitions of Distance Education

Some early labels of distance education like correspondence study, home study, independent study, and distance teaching were indicative of the types of activity going on in the early years (Keegan, 2013). However, formal definitions of distance education did not arrive until late into the telecommunications era. One of the earliest definitions was from Germany in 1967, read:

“Distance education (*Fernstudium*)...is made possible at a distance by means of media which can cover long distances. The opposite of ‘distance education’ is ‘direct education’ or ‘face-to-face education’: a type of education that takes place with direct contact between leturers and students.” (Dohmen, as cited in Keegan, 1994, pg.41).

It was not until later that Keegan (1980) defined distance education with more clarity, drawing together these ideas from the past and looking into a growing future of distance education. Keegan used these six components to define distance education:

1. Separation of teacher and student;
2. Influence of an educational organization;
3. Use of technical media;
4. Two-way communication;
5. Possibility of occasional seminars; and
6. Participation in the most industrial form of education. (p.33)

In the often-cited anthology “Handbook of Distance Education” (2013), Black wrote that 1980 was a significant year refining the distance education definition as Keegan synthesized predominant thoughts from previous years. Moore & Kearsley affirmed that this became “the most widely cited definition of distance education” (1996, p. 229).

Most historical research is in agreement that distance education means a separation between students and teachers that must be overcome by some sort of technology. Still today, this bridge of distance by technology is affirmed in modern definitions (Keegan, 2013; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). To these two primary points, Simonson and Seepersaud (2019) added the criteria of being part of an educational organization, having two-way communication, and providing individualized instruction. These additions are highly contested in modern debates as entities struggle to create one, single definition of distance education.

Creating multiple definitions becomes particularly problematic when attempting to define what is and what is not distance education, particularly in the application of policy. The most widely applied of modern distance education definitions is by the US Federal Government. IPEDS is the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, a system of survey data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and available for free online. As IPEDS collects data, the operational definition for distance education provided by NCES is “education that uses one or more technologies to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor synchronously or asynchronously” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019, p. 10). This same definition qualifies schools to receive Title IV funding, which leads to the case of Western Governors University and the importance of defining distance education.

### The Case of WGU

A modern example of applying a formal definition of distance education is the interesting case of Western Governors University (WGU), a non-profit, online university in Salt Lake City, Utah, which in 2017 came under an indicting audit report by the US Department of Education (2017). WGU was founded in 1997 as a fully online school using a competency-based learning model and grew to a fall 2017 enrollment of 98,600 students, making it the second-largest university in the United States (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018). WGU claims it is an online university “created just for you” and touts many accolades on their website. The department of education, on the other hand, claimed that more than 50% of WGU’s students were enrolled in “correspondence courses” and not distance education (USDE, 2017, p.2). The critical issue for the auditors was that in order to be distance education, the course “must use technologies to support regular and substantive interaction between students and their instructors” (USDE, 2017, p.2). They were using technology, but the interaction was questionable, particularly since they did not typically have regular faculty teaching their courses. On their website, WGU posted a statement that “strongly disagrees” with the Inspector General’s audit report and explains that they have no decision authority, which ultimately rests in the hands of the Secretary of Education (Western Governors University, 2018).

A few years previously, in 2006, congress removed Title IV restrictions to allow distance education (labeled at that time as “telecommunication courses”). However, the requirements included that the programs were to “support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor” (United States Department of Education, 2006). As part of the congressional discussion on this matter, they concluded that regular and substantive was to mean “that the interaction should both take place at regular intervals and not be trivial” (United States Department of Education, 2006, p.64379). What the 2017 audit concluded was the courses met the definition of a correspondence course, but not of distance education. Even though it was at distance and over the internet, the lack of personal interaction made the “education” part dubious. The audit not only recommended cutting off WGU’s Title IV money but suggested that some \$713 million should return to the government (Supiano, 2017).

The case of WGU underlines the power importance of establishing a clear definition of distance education for universities. Fundamentally, the government was not just asking if this was “distance education,” but if it was “education.” After almost two years and many months of negotiations, in January 2019, the US Department of Education broadened the meaning of “regular and substantive” interaction and deemed that WGU was eligible to take part in federal student aid (Lieberman, 2019).

### Guiding Theories

Many theoretical ideas could guide a definition of distance education, but at least three prominent ones are worth mentioning. One such distance education theorist is Charles Wedemeyer (1981). If Wedemeyer was still living, he might have fought on the side of WGU. He was a proponent of the theory of independent study and believed that educators should exploit the physical distance between teacher and student to encourage individualization, convenience, and personal responsibility. He believed the learner should be directly in the center of the educational process with a more active role, rather than the teachers. Students should be permitted to “start, stop, and learn at their own pace” (Simonson & Seepersaud, 2019, p.16).

A second theorist, Otto Peters (2002), presents two current models of distance education: the network-based distance education model and the technologically extended classroom. In the network-based model, content delivery and learning happen as students seek and interact with material across their digital networks as needed. There is great autonomy, openness, and flexibility in this model of guided discovery. In 2002, the web was just in its infancy, and now we are connected to this network through computers, phones, watches, and speakers in our kitchen, in ways that Peters never imagined. In Peters’ second current model, the technologically extended classroom, the teaching presentation is transmitted to students at a distance by video conferencing systems. At the time Peters wrote, those modes of transmission were over satellite or cable TV or utilizing dedicated systems like Cisco and ITV. This model has reduced openness since it is more a traditional mode of teacher lecturing and much less flexibility since it was happening in real-time. However, many of our modern, asynchronous online classes are just as limited with one-way videos, automatically graded quizzes, and lack of human interaction.

A third theorist, Inglis, divides distance education into two distinct categories of “resource-based learning” (RBL) and “networked learning.” RBL provides the student access to material online (as cited in Panda, 2003). The student engages, more or less, in self-instruction as they guide themselves through the course. Networked learning, on the other hand, views the connections between persons as essential to education. This is also called the “virtual classroom.” The internet is still the mode of delivery, but the primary activities are the interactions between students to teachers and students to students. The virtual classroom would still make use of materials, but to support, not replace human interactions.

One final theorist, and probably the most popular as we consider the future of distance education, is Michael G. Moore. Moore built on Wedemeyer, among others, introducing the idea of “transactional distance” (1983, 1993), which is the perceived gap between the student and teacher because of distance and technology. He promotes the idea that as this gap decreases, learning will increase. Applying Moore, Saba writes:

“Thus categorizing courses as distance education just because they are offered on the internet is false according to the theory of transactional distance. Courses based on an industrial standard design that do not adapt dynamically to the individual learner do not meet sufficient criteria to be deemed distance education.”(2016, p. 25).

Moore also classified distance education programs as “autonomous” or “nonautonomous,” depending on if it was the student or the teacher who was determining objectives, resources, and evaluations (Simonson & Seepersaud, 2019, p.17). Moore helps to clarify our understanding of distance education further, both now and as it continues to expand.

### Creating Better Definitions

So, considering the historical definitions that predominantly include distance and technology, as well as these four theorists, perhaps three definitions could be formed under the larger umbrella of distance education. Each definition is designed to be both descriptive as well as aspirational. The term “education” over “learning” is favored, taking the perspective of institutions, administrators, and instructors rather than students.

1. Virtual Network Education: A self-directed, autonomous learning experience using technology that networks students with resources, instructors, and other teachers, potentially without a formal institution, where students have great autonomy and flexibility, but less direct teacher contact and direction.
2. Cloned Content Education: A school or instructor-directed learning experience using technology that connects students to pre-developed content, where students have less autonomy but more flexibility to learn asynchronously, and they contact the teacher as needed.
3. Remote Classroom Education: An instructor-led learning experience using technology to extend the synchronous classroom experience across distances, where students have less autonomy and less flexibility, but have more direct teacher contact and direction.

Of course, few working distance education models would fit cleanly into just one of these definitions. When evaluating or planning distance education, it might be wise to consider what percentage of each might be employed. One danger is allowing the model to swing too far towards “distance” and “technology” while forgetting the dominant idea that it should be “education.” On the other hand, one could swing towards such a strict definition of education, that the enormous potential of using technology to span the distance between teacher and student is missed. In the title of this paper, “definitions” is intentionally plural. A single definition of distance education is no longer sufficient. While the common definition of distance education continues promulgation, perhaps it is time to consider that multiple definitions could and should exist to help define and guide policy and development. These definitions are not the final word, but rather another opportunity for further research and discussion around a distance education ideal for which to aim.

---

### References

- Almquist, S. G. (Ed.). (2011). *Distributed learning and virtual librarianship*. ABC-CLIO.
- Black, L. M. (2013). A history of scholarship. In *Handbook of distance education* (pp. 21-38). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Dohmen, G. (1967). *Das fernstudium. Ein neues pädagogisches forschungund arbeitsfeld. Tubingen, Germany: DIFF.*
- Ginder, S. A., Kelly-Reid, J. E., & Mann, F. B. (2018). Enrollment and employees in postsecondary institutions, fall 2017; and financial statistics and academic Libraries, fiscal year 2017: first look (provisional data). *National Center for Education Statistics*.
- Haworth, M., & Hopkins, S. (2009). *On the air: Educational Radio, its history and effect on literacy, and educational technology implementation*, Retrieved from <https://blogs.ubc.ca/etec540sept09/2009/10/28/on-the-air-educational-radio-its-history-and-effect-on-literacy-and-educational-technology-by-michael-haworth-stephanie-hopkins/>
- Keegan, D. (1980). On defining distance education. *Distance education*, 1(1), 13-36.
- Keegan, D. (2013). *Foundations of distance education* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Kentnor, H. E. (2015). Distance education and the evolution of online learning in the United States. *Curriculum and Teaching Dialogue*, 17(1), 21-34.
- Larreamendy-Joerns, J., & Leinhardt, G. (2006). Going the distance with online education. *Review of Educational Research*, 76(4), 567-605.
- Lederman, D. (2018, January 5). Who is studying online (and where). *Inside Higher Ed Online*. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/digital->

[learning/article/2018/01/05/new-us-data-show-continued-growth-college-students-studying](#)

Lieberman, M. (2019, April 9). Moving forward (at last) on federal rule changes. *Inside Higher Ed Online*. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2019/04/09/federal-rules-student-teacher-interaction-accreditation>

Matthews, D. (1999). The origins of distance education and its use in the United States. *The Journal*, 27(2).

Miller, M. D. (2014). *Minds Online: Teaching Effectively with Technology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Mood, T. A. (1995). *Distance Education: An Annotated Bibliography*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited.

Moore, M. G. (1983). The individual adult learner. In M. Tight, (Ed.), *Adult learning and education*, 153–168. London: Croom Helm.

Moore, M. G. (1993). Theory of transactional distance. *Theoretical principles of distance education*, 22.

Moore, M. G., & Kearsley, G. (1996). *Distance education: A systems view of online learning*: Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.

Morabito, M. (2018). *Origins of CALCampus*. Retrieved from <http://www.calcampus.com/calc.htm>

National Center for Education Statistics. (2018). Digest of educational statistics: 2018, Chapter 3: Postsecondary education. Retrieved from [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/ch\\_3.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/ch_3.asp)

National Center for Education Statistics. (2019). 2019-20 Survey Materials: Glossary. Retrieved from <https://surveys.nces.ed.gov/ipeds/Downloads/Forms/IPEDSGlossary.pdf>

National Center for Education Statistics. (2020). *Number and percentage distribution of students enrolled at title iv institutions, by control of institution, student level, level of institution, distance education status of student, and distance education status of institution: United state*. Retrieved from: <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/search/ViewTable?tableId=26394&returnUrl=%2Fipeds%2Fsearch%2F%3Fquery%3Ddistance%2520education%26query%2%3Ddistance%2520education%26resultType%3Dtable%26p>

Panda, S. (2003). *Planning and management in distance education*. Sterling, VA: Routledge.

Peters, O. (2002). *Distance education in transition: New trends and challenges*. BIS Verlag.

Pittman, V. (2008). An alien presence: The long, sad history of correspondence study at the University of Chicago. *American Educational History Journal* 35(1), 169-183.

Saba, F. (2016). Theories of distance education: Why they matter. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 2016(173), 21-30.

Simonson, M., & Seepersaud, D. J. (2019). *Distance education: Definition and glossary of terms* (4th ed.): IAP.

Supiano, B. (2017, Sept 21). What you need to know about the Inspector General's audit of Western Governors U. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.chronicle.com/article/What-You-Need-to-Know-About/241263>

United States Department of Education. (2006, November). *Federal Register: 34 CFR Parts 668, 673, 682 and 685 federal student aid programs; final rule* (Publication Number RIN 1840–AC87). Retrieved from <https://ifap.ed.gov/sites/default/files/attachments/fregisters/FR11012006HERA.pdf>

United States Department of Education. (2014, February). *Title IV of the Higher Education Act programs: Additional safeguards are needed to help mitigate the risks that are unique to the distance education environment. Final audit report* (Publication Number ED-OIG/A07L0001). Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oig/auditreports/fy2014/a07l0001.pdf>

United States Department of Education. (2017, September). *Western Governors University was not eligible to participate in the Title IV programs. Final audit report* (Publication Number ED-OIG/A05M0009). Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oig/auditreports/fy2017/a05m0009.pdf>

Wedemeyer, C. A. (2010). *Learning at the back door: Reflections on nontraditional learning in the lifespan*. Charlotte, NC: IAP.

Western Governors University (2018). *OIG audit report*. Retrieved from <https://m2.wgu.edu/oig-audit-report>

---

*Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, XXIII, Number 2, Summer 2020*  
University of West Georgia, Distance Education Center  
[Back to the Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration Contents](#)