

DISTANCE LEARNING FOR GED® STUDENTS IN RURAL PENNSYLVANIA

Esther Prins, Brendaly Drayton and Ramazan Gungor, The Pennsylvania State University; Cathy Kassab, By the Numbers. *The Amer. Jrnl. Of Distance Education*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08923647.2012.722470>

About the Distance Learning Study

This study examines the availability, usage and effectiveness of distance learning (DL) for rural GED® candidates in Pennsylvania; students' demographic and educational characteristics and participation patterns; and the perceived advantages and disadvantages of DL for students and education providers. Data were collected on 24,143 rural GED® students from 2004-2008, including demographic survey data and interviews with DL educators and students. Two DL models were studied: "pure distance" (fewer than five hours of face-to-face contact, basically assessment and orientation), and "blended distance" (more than five hours of face-to-face interaction, including some instruction. Of these, 4% (975 total) participated in DL, with 42% of their instructional hours in DL. Three-fourths (736) of these DL students participated in blended instruction.

Findings from Research

On average, all DL students had 49 instructional hours, with 15 hours in distance instruction. Both blended and pure DL students' instructional hours had an average of 15 distance hours, but blended learners had an additional 38 face-to-face hours. For blended learners, distance education is often offered to supplement face-to-face instruction by increasing instructional hours or deterring "stop out."

Print plus computer were both forms of DL. With the limitations on technological (e.g., lack of broadband internet for rural populations) and financial resources, print materials even with the issues of mailing and copying as well as videos were needed. With online students, the more interactive types of activities and different types of materials were a positive.

DL was no more or less effective than face-to-face instruction. A logistic regression analysis was used to control for students' demographic, educational and participation indicators. As in other studies, distance learners with a higher educational level on entry were more successful in passing the GED exam.

Advantages of DL included expanded access and supported students who preferred to study independently or were constrained by transportation, work or childcare/caretaking responsibilities. Interviews with educators and rural students showed that DL is a viable GED study option for rural counties, and offers rural residents a wider array of information and increases instructional time by complementing face-to-face study.

Disadvantages of DL are predominately the challenge of students' restricted access to technology.

Specific Implications of the Distance Learning Study

Implication: Use distance learning to increase instructional time through blended instruction and provide additional opportunities for GED® students.

What the research says:

DL is as effective as face-to-face instruction for rural GED® students.

DL adds flexibility to studying for the GED®.

Students with strong academic skills appear to be the best suited for pure DL.

DL supports the development of study skills, and students' taking ownership of their own learning.

Therefore, you should...

Offer high-scoring students a short-term, intensive DL course.

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Strategies

- Use distance learning with face-to-face instruction to increase instructional hours, add flexibility, and teach study skills and self-efficacy.
- Use distance learning for students who cannot access face-to-face programs.
- Factor in access to technology in determining what types of DL will work (online, print or print plus computer).

Note: An excellent bibliography is also included.