

Spring-Summer, 2005

Project IDEAL Update



Project IDEAL Support Center
Institute for Social Research
University of Michigan

Project IDEAL — *Improving Distance Education for Adult Learners* — A collaborative of the states of Arizona, Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Texas

Finding Good Resources for Students

14 Teachers Pilot Test New PD Course

Project IDEAL has introduced the third course in its teacher professional development series: *DL103—Resources for Distance Study*. The course is designed for experienced teachers who have completed *DL102—Study Groups*. DL103 focuses on training teachers to evaluate educational materials that can be used to supplement students' distance instruction.

Fourteen teachers from Ohio and Pennsylvania are enrolled in DL103 and are exploring pre-GED and GED resources. Participants evaluate websites, determine which activities a student should complete, and recommend how much seat time credit students should receive for completing activities.

Teachers who focus on pre-GED materials are reviewing web sites suggested in *Pre-GED Connection*. Teachers who focus on GED-level materials draw from a list of GED resources identified by various Study Group teachers.

The Resources course runs for four weeks for a total of 10 hours. Teachers who complete the course are eligible to receive 1.0 CEU from the University of Michigan. Details on running a Resources course will be available at the August workshop.

State Directors Tackle Distance Policy

As states launch their distance education programs they need to develop policies that provide guidance to these programs. Several IDEAL states with mature distance education programs are grappling with policy issues. In March, state directors Tom Orsini (NY), Denise Pottmeyer (OH), and Rose Brandt (PA) met with DAEL director Cheryl

Project IDEAL is a consortium of states working to develop effective distance education programs for adult learners. The Project IDEAL Support Center at the University of Michigan helps consortium states by developing training materials and web-based tools. The Center provides technical support in the areas of teacher training, research design, data collection, data analysis and reporting. Through collaborative research and practice, we are working to provide quality distance education for adult learners across the country.

Arizona Off to a Great Start



Arizona's distance education project is off to a running start! In January, teachers and administrators from eight pilot sites spent 2-½ days exploring distance education, being introduced to DL101, and becoming familiar with their distance curriculum, *MHC GED Integrated Online Solution*. DL101 co-teachers Sheryl Hart and Barbara Ford facilitated active discussions on their CommunityZero site and continue to foster growth of their distance community through monthly conference calls.

In three months, the pilot sites have enrolled approximately 200 distance students. Sites are using the Project IDEAL *Student Intake Survey* as part of their recruitment process. By talking to potential students about their responses to the survey, teachers have been able to help students make informed decisions about whether distance is a good fit. Data from Arizona's intake surveys will be included in IDEAL's larger research efforts to identify traits that characterize successful distance learners.

Keenan and Project IDEAL staff to explore state and federal policy concerns.

Topics. Federal policy questions focused on assessment and accountability, with an emphasis on appropriate ways to include distance learners in the NRS. State questions addressed an array of issues including allocation of funds, technology, staffing and professional development, and sustaining distance learning programs.

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Massachusetts: Keeping the Conversation Alive

Many DL101 participants say that as their course progresses, they feel a growing sense of community with their fellow participants. These distance teachers use the communication tools on the course website to share ideas and information. Yet once the 8-week course is over, that sense of community often fades, leaving teachers feeling somewhat isolated. Massachusetts DL101 facilitator, Jennifer Rafferty, recognized this common problem and decided to take action to ensure the community of practice she and her teachers developed continued to flourish beyond the official course completion date.

After the teachers finished DL101, Jennifer reconfigured the state's CommunityZero website to highlight the discussion tool and began seeding it with questions that would get teachers to continue sharing their insights with one another. To keep the discussions fresh and to encourage teacher involvement, Jennifer hired several teachers to co-facilitate specific discussions in their areas of expertise and then linked the discussions to a series of face-to-face workshops. Complementing the online discussions and workshops are monthly videoconferences and an end-of-year face-to-face retreat. By actively involving teachers in the process, narrowly focusing the topics for discussion, and creating links between the various professional development modes, Massachusetts has developed a vibrant professional community of distance teachers. Their discussion will provide the state with a ready record of the challenges and opportunities of implementing key components of distance learning programs.

Missouri: Mentoring Distance Teachers

How can you help new distance teachers develop their teaching skills while enabling more experienced teachers to continue to grow professionally? This question has been on the minds of Missouri's professional development staff. With a distance education program that has grown to include 30 agencies across the state, Missouri recognized the need to systematically support the professional growth of its distance teachers. Impressed by the University of Phoenix's approach to improving teaching through mentoring, Missouri initiated a mentoring program in 2004 with a similar design.

Distance teachers were assigned to one of five small groups. Each group was composed of teachers with varying levels of experience, including a mentor (with at least three years distance teaching experience), intermediate teachers (with 1-2 years of experience) and teachers new to distance education. Each group also included teachers with varying content and technical expertise. Participants had the opportunity to get to know one another at a face-to-face training that laid the groundwork for "comfortable communication" online.

Following face-to-face training, each mentor provided her group with ongoing support. While some communication occurred via phone, most was done via email or through the group's "teacher work room" on Blackboard. Mentors also supported new teachers by observing online teacher-student discussions and providing feedback about the discussions.

Missouri will be surveying participants about the value of this mentoring program and revising the program based on participant feedback. The IDEAL Support Center worked closely with Mentor Program staff to develop this tailored survey.

Study Groups

This spring, two DL102 Study Groups are being conducted. In the first group, seven PA teachers are exploring teaching *Workplace Essential Skills*. In the second, ten teachers from four states (AR, OH, PA, and RI) are analyzing GED teaching activities.

State Directors Tackle Distance Policy

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Initial Conclusions. State directors agreed that students who are studying academic programs should be included in the NRS and held to standards comparable to those for classroom students. Discussion focused on defining distance learners, the challenges of post-testing, assigning seat time, and determining which NRS tables should include distance learners. The group reflected on how to deal with distance students studying workplace skills curricula. Results of the meeting will be captured in a working paper and explored further during the August workshop.

Sample Items from the Motivation Survey

- I practice the important material until I have it memorized.
- I try to make all the different ideas fit together and make sense.
- I review my notes and course materials over and over.
- I try to relate what I'm learning to what I already know.
- I stop once in a while and go over what I have been studying.

New Student Surveys!

The Support Center has developed three surveys states can use to learn more about their distance students.

Learner Intake Survey. This short survey is designed to help teachers and students determine whether studying at a distance is the right option for the student. It explores students' study habits, organizational skills, access to and comfort with technology, and life routines.

The teacher uses the student's responses as points for discussion to help decide if the student is suited for distance and whether the student needs additional training to prepare for distance study.

Student Satisfaction Survey. This end-of-course survey explores students' perceptions of their distance experiences. The survey asks about satisfaction with their intake experience, their instructor, and course content. A state can use the results as another indicator in the annual evaluation of its distance efforts. Paper copies of the *Learner Intake* and *Student Satisfaction* surveys have been distributed to DLCs and are available for use in both online and paper formats.

Student Motivation Survey. Several member states have expressed interest in gaining a deeper understanding of the cognitive characteristics that favor student success in working at a distance. Pilot testing is underway to evaluate measures proposed by motivation expert Dr. Christopher Wolter at the University of Houston. The new survey is designed to characterize the learner's motivation to get a GED and to measure use of effective study strategies.

Teacher & Administrator Surveys Revised

The 2005 Teacher and Administrator surveys are now available. Both have been revised extensively and reflect questions and ideas suggested by member states.

The *Teacher Survey* addresses the following topics:

- The time it takes each week to support distance learners
- Quality and suitability of the distance curriculum being used and whether supplemental materials are needed
- Recommendations regarding current state distance policies
- Differences between distance and classroom teaching

The *Administrator Survey* asks about the challenges of staffing, funding, and supporting distance efforts in a center.

Thanks for the excellent feedback provided by: Kathy Ira and her MD teachers, Rosemary Matt (NY), Tanya Lipinski (NY), Karen Scheid (OH), Kathy Sheehy (NY) John Stains (MO), Kathleen Steinchen (NY), and Bill Whitaker (NC).

Get Ready for the Annual Distance Workshop

The Project IDEAL Support Center will host its fourth annual workshop August 8-11. This is a chance to share insights and learn from others regarding best practices in distance education. A kickoff reception will be held Sunday evening August 7th. The workshop will start Monday at 9:00 a.m. and end Thursday afternoon. Contact Debbie Bourque (dbourque@umich.edu) for travel info. Topics for this year include:

- Using enrollment, retention and seat time data to monitor and improve program performance
- Using results of the teacher, administrator, and learner surveys to evaluate program design
- Federal policies on distance education and the NRS
- State policies to promote program success
- Delivering distance instruction from a single agency
- New curriculum options for distance education
- New ways to help distance teachers improve their skills

Pilot Test Participants Needed!

The Support Center is conducting a pilot test of the motivation survey. Contact Shannon Young (shannony@umich.edu) if your center would be willing to identify distance learners who could participate before June 22.
Participants will be compensated.

Who Is Distance Education Reaching?

As any teacher will tell you, distance learning is not for every student. Some students require the extra support, structure, and social interaction available in a regular classroom. Others, however, flourish when they are given the opportunity to work independently. This is particularly true for adults who are motivated to succeed but who cannot regularly attend classroom programs.

Rachel is a good example. After working for 15 years as a machinist in Arkansas, Rachel was unexpectedly laid off. About the same time her husband lost his job. With no income and no job prospects, Rachel realized she needed to change her life. She decided to develop her computer skills, attend college, and find a new job. Yet the nearest adult education center was 30 miles away, and she could not afford gas money to attend classes 3-4 days per week. Distance learning offered Rachel a potential solution to her problem.

Rachel enrolled in the Conway Adult Education distance program. With the guidance and support of her teachers, Sabrena and Crystal, Rachel began her distance studies. Working from home, she studied PLATO online and QWIZ business software intensively for 5-10 hours per week, completing over 130 hours of work in one school year. As a result of her hard work, Rachel improved her literacy skills, learned computer software, found a job, and enrolled in college. Rachel emailed her teachers: "I really enjoyed the IDEAL Project, because it saved me gas when I wasn't working. And nowadays that's a lot. It also showed me I could be

disciplined enough to sit down at home and work.... Please keep up the program, it really does help."

Alice provides another example of how removing barriers can be an important key to success. Alice is a young mother in rural Pennsylvania. Her goals were clear: to earn her GED and then open an in-home daycare center. Yet, Alice had an important logistical barrier she couldn't overcome—finding reliable daycare for her two small children so she could attend classes. Her husband couldn't help because he is a truck driver with an unpredictable schedule. Further confounding her efforts was the fact that the local adult education center closed.

Alice was close to giving up when she learned about Pennsylvania's centralized distance education program. This program provides distance teachers for learners across the state. Alice enrolled and, after working on *GED Connection*, passed all but the Writing subtest for the GED. Alice is continuing her distance studies and both she and her teacher, Lisa, are confident she will pass the GED test on her next attempt.

Distance learning provided a means for both Rachel and Alice to pursue their educational goals. But the opportunity to study at home was not sufficient to ensure success. They had the skills needed to learn on their own and the motivation to work until they reached their goals. The Support Center is engaged in two research studies to measure independent study skills and motivation in adult learners. (See the article on New Student Surveys.) We plan to refine these measures so teachers can use them at intake to predict whether an adult interested in distance study is likely to succeed.

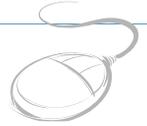


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Monthly Reports Help States Plan & Evaluate

Each month, states that utilize IDEAL's online logs receive two reports designed to help DLCs track progress in their distance programs. The *Enrollment Summary* contains teacher-level information on numbers of students recruited, enrolled, active, inactive, complete, and posttested. The *Curriculum Summary* contains student enrollment by curriculum by teacher.

Adjustments Planned for Online Logs

Changes in Seat Time. In the 2004 Teacher Survey, teachers indicated that the seat time credit hours awarded for Internet activities associated with GEDC and WES were lower than they should be. They recommended that GEDC credit be increased from 3.0 to 4.0 hours per activity and WES from 1.5 to 2.5 hours per activity. States using these curricula were polled and agreed credit should be increased beginning July 1, 2005. The logs will automatically make this adjustment for all data entered after that date.

Recording Assessment Time. At the request of states, fields will be added to the logs for recording time students spend on curriculum-specific assessments. For each pre and/or posttest a student completes in GEDC, Pre-GEDC or WES, the student will receive one hour of seat time credit. For products that include time tracking (e.g., PLATO, SkillsTutor), assessment credit is already reflected in the clock time reported by the system.