

## CONTACT INFORMATION

A successful distance learning experience begins with frequent, **EARLY** communication between the student, counselors and college. Contact your counselor or college **AT LEAST** one semester prior to the desired enrollment date to discuss enrollment in a distance education course.

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## A Student's Guide to Distance Education



### NETnet: Distance Education and New Technologies

The Northeast Texas Consortium or "NETnet" is the collaborative effort of 15 higher education institutions to bring a wide array of educational opportunities to 50 rural Northeast Texas counties. NETnet's objective is to make available—via innovative technology applications—a diverse curriculum specifically designed to meet the evolving needs of a highly competitive, yet geographically isolated, client population.

With connectivity across the state and well beyond, the NETnet Center for Educational Technologies (located in Tyler, TX) delivers our consortium member's college classrooms onto high school and college campuses across East Texas.

Contact information for each of our member institutions is located at the end of this publication. Remember: early and frequent contact with the college of your choice will enhance your distance learning experience.

NETnet Member Institutions	
Panola College	Kilgore College
Angelina College	Texarkana College
Paris Junior College	Tyler Junior College
Texas A&M -Texarkana	Texas A&M - Commerce
Sam Houston State University	Texas State Technical College
Trinity Valley Community College	The University of Texas at Tyler
Northeast Texas Community College	Stephen F. Austin State University
The University of Texas Health Center at Tyler	



The Northeast Texas Consortium (NETnet)  
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## A brief introduction to distance education courses

### What is distance education?

A distance learning class is one in which the students are geographically separated from the instructor. Distance education courses use a variety of teaching methods, strategies, and technologies. There are Interactive Videoconferencing (ITV) courses, Online courses (taught using the Internet), Telecourses (videotaped lessons) and 'Hybrid' courses that combine several different technologies with a traditional face-to-face component. For example, you may find that some distance education courses require students to visit the college campus for a face-to-face orientation before the class begins, and that many ITV courses have a large online component.



### What's so different about a distance learning course?

The biggest difference is that you must take a much more active role in your own education. In the distance education environment, you will not be able to sit back passively and expect to pass the course. To get the most out of the course, you must be able to communicate effectively with fellow students and the instructor. Whatever communication technology is being used—ITV, Internet, or Telecourses—you **must be prepared to participate**; you will not be allowed to "lurk" on the edges of the class activity. Distance learning is not the same as face-to-face instruction, so the instructor and the students must work harder to create a good interactive environment.

You should be prepared to attend class regularly so you can participate in the class activities; in addition to perhaps violating attendance policies of particular schools, absences mean you will lose the benefit of interacting with your peers and instructor.

Technical difficulties do arise in distance learning courses, but don't use the technology as an excuse for a lack of progress. You must work with the technology and use it to your advantage. Remember, the skills developed in the distance education environment—becoming a more self-directed learner and being able to use new technologies—will give you a significant advantage in the workplace.

*Visit the NETnet website to take a variety of free interactive tests to see if distance learning is right for you, and to determine your learning style.*

<http://www.netnet.org/instructors/resources/distedlinks.htm#evaluation>

### Is distance education right for me?

Many students find distance learning a challenging and rewarding educational experience. However, **distance learning courses are not for everyone**. Depending on their emotional and intellectual maturity level, learning styles, and work habits, some students may need the face-to-face contact and instructor proximity found in the traditional classroom.

#### Learning styles

To be successful in your distance education course you need to have a very good understanding of your strengths and weaknesses as a learner. You need to ask yourself how you learn most effectively. You may have to:

#### learn how *you* learn & learn how *to* learn

For example, it would be very useful for you to know if you are a visual learner, an auditory learner or a kinesthetic learner:



Visual learners are those who prefer to learn from print material such as text and graphics; things they can see.



Auditory learners are those who prefer to learn from listening to speech or other sounds; things they can hear.



Kinesthetic learners are those who prefer to learn from handling objects or performing a task; something they can touch.

Knowing your preferred learning style means you can determine how best to study for exams and quizzes. It will also help you to understand why sometimes you don't grasp some things as easily as your classmates do.

### Characteristics of a successful distance education student

Regardless of the delivery method (ITV, Internet, Telecourse) a successful distance education student must:

- Be self-directed
- Be resourceful
- Be assertive - if you don't know something, ask!
- Communicate and participate
- Be respectful of the other sites/students
- Be comfortable with the various technologies used
- Meet the necessary technical requirements and be comfortable with the equipment
- Have the time and resources to dedicate to college-level coursework
- Be comfortable with the written word and use of e-mail as a communication form
- Be able to prioritize responsibilities and work independently
- Ask for assistance when needed to build academic and social support systems

## What technologies are used in distance education?

You can expect to encounter the following kinds of technologies in distance education courses:

- Interactive Videoconferencing
- Internet instruction
- WebCT
- Blackboard
- Telecourses
- Internet chat rooms
- Online bulletin boards/ discussion groups
- E-mail



These advanced technologies offer you the opportunity to take courses you would not normally be able to take. They also provide you with a more flexible learning environment, presenting you with the opportunity for more input than is found in many traditional classrooms. Distance education courses introduce you to the diversity of college life by providing you with the opportunity to interact with students at other remote sites who have different points of view.

In an ITV class, you will be using television equipment such as cameras, microphones, monitors and VCRs. It is very likely that you will also be working with computers. You may need to learn new computer applications like WebCT or Blackboard for Internet courses, and you'll definitely need to be comfortable surfing the Net and using email.

## What is Interactive Videoconferencing (ITV)?

An instructor will teach the class from the "host" or "local" site, and students will be at "remote" sites. Students can see and hear everything the instructor does and says - and, the instructor can see and hear everything students do and say. ITV students may be part of a "class" that is going on in three or four different cities or towns simultaneously. ITV rooms may contain television and document cameras, monitors, microphones, videocassette recorders, telephones, facsimile machines and computers.

The primary advantage of an ITV course is that the level of student-to-teacher and student-to-student interaction is as close to face-to-face instruction as it gets. Students see and hear, and are seen and heard, by the instructor and fellow classmates at remote sites in real time.

## Will I be asked to participate a lot?

ITV isn't like educational television; you can't just sit in front of the TV and "watch" the class. The key to a successful ITV course is interaction. You must get involved to fully benefit from the activities. This means that you must:

- ask questions to seek clarification in class
- contribute to the discussions
- complete all the assignments
- attend every ITV session or log on to the computer conference
- contact the instructor outside of class if you have any questions
- take initiative

## Is there anything special about an ITV classroom?

The equipment in the room—cameras, microphones, TV monitors—and the number of remote sites that connect to the videoconference all contribute to the unique atmosphere of the ITV classroom. Along with this new environment come new rules of ITV etiquette:

**Be Seen!** Depending on the camera angle, the instructor may not be able to see you well enough to know that you have a question or are confused, so when you have a question, identify yourself by name and site: "This is Gretchen in Tyler." Sit in view of the monitors.

**Be Heard!** Face forward and speak clearly in a normal tone of voice (you don't have to shout) so you can be heard distinctly at all the sites. To account for any lag time in audio or video transmission, pause about 3-5 seconds after pressing the mic, then ask your question or make your comment. Wait a second to release the mic after you've finished speaking.

**Be Active!** ITV is not passive television viewing; it's an interactive course in which you are expected to participate.

**Be Assertive!** If there is a problem with the video or audio, let the instructor or local facilitator know so Tech Support can be contacted to correct it. Don't hesitate to say something if the video or audio is not coming in loud and clear at your site, if the instructor is out of camera or microphone range, if there has been an equipment failure, etc. Also, if the graphics are too small to see clearly, let the instructor or local facilitator know immediately so it can be corrected.

## ITV etiquette tips to enhance your distance learning course:

- Sit in the same seat each class - this will help the instructor remember names.
- Be on time for the start of classes. The videoconference connection is controlled remotely by computer, beginning and ending at predetermined times, so class begins whether the remote students have arrived or not.
- Complete assignments before coming to class. ITV is an interactive environment and instructors require *informed* participation.
- Come to class with texts, notebooks, pens, and place them on the desk before class begins to reduce background noise. Avoid rustling papers while others are speaking, since their microphones can transmit this noise to the other sites.
- Remember - while a student is on camera, fellow students and the instructor can see everything that student is doing.
- If you have persistent problems with fellow students arriving late, talking, making noise during class, etc., please contact your instructor or local facilitator.
- There may be students at other sites that cannot see or hear you, so please respect their need to be included and use your microphone when appropriate.
- Exercise patience when the instructor works with students at other sites.
- Don't get anxious or irritated by the technical difficulties that may interrupt communications from time to time.

## Will I have to know how to operate the ITV system?

In all probability, no. Most sites will have a local facilitator who takes care of setting up the room and technical troubleshooting. You may be required to use the equipment to give a presentation or to participate in an activity. If this is the case, your instructor or facilitator will show you what you need to know.

## Are ITV courses videotaped?

Instructors may videotape their classes as a back-up in case of technical difficulties or for students who miss class due to excused absences. Most instructors will not allow students to consistently miss class and simply watch the taped copies.



## Will students be on camera?

In an ITV course you will be on camera several times during each class. You may feel a little uncomfortable the first few times you see and hear yourself as others do. But don't worry, you'll quickly get used to it—remember, everyone else feels the same way! You may be asked to sign a release form allowing yourself to be videotaped.

## ITV Drawbacks:

Interactive videoconferencing is the "next best thing to being there." However, one key difference between a traditional classroom and an ITV course is the amount of instructor contact. Because the computers controlling the videoconference will end the session at the scheduled end of class time, students will not be able to stay after class to speak privately with the instructor. For questions about grading decisions, approval for a paper topic, or other individual matters, contact the instructor outside of class.

## What is an Internet class?

First of all, the terms "Internet" and "Online" are often used interchangeably to describe a course in which all of the course content and class communication is provided over the Internet. When taking an Internet course, you complete your coursework using a computer that has an Internet connection. You may participate from an Internet classroom where the instructor provides information, instructions and assignments.



Online courses may or may not be self-paced instruction. You will need to "attend" or check in to your online classroom regularly. In some classes, attendance is defined as regular participation in certain online activities (chat rooms, bulletin boards, e-mail). Depending on the instructor's policy, you may receive a failing grade if your absences or lack of activity exceed the limits. Some classes may require you to mail in course assignments, or to take a proctored exam. **NOTE:** Some courses may require the use of additional specific software. Contact the instructor or college representative for details about a specific course.

## Taking an Internet class offers many advantages:

- The ability to take courses at convenient times and/or places
- The opportunity to interact with a more diverse group of students from a wider geographic area, and access to a more resources and experts than you might find in a traditional classroom setting
- Greater control over the learning process
- Online students may communicate with faculty and other students **more** than they would in a traditional class.
- Experience in distance education may also be helpful if you're planning to work at a company that uses online or other forms of distance training.

## The successful Internet student must:

- Have the self-discipline to learn without face-to-face interaction found in a traditional or ITV classroom
- Be able to carefully read & follow written instructions
- Enjoy working independently and pacing their own learning
- Be able to organize and prioritize work and to stay on task without direct supervision.
- Meet deadlines and keep track of projects
- Be willing to learn how to use the technology (hardware and software) to complete course work.
- Be problem solvers and seek alternate solutions while waiting for assistance.
- Be persistent and refuse to give up, even when encountering technical problems.

## Drawbacks to Internet courses

Internet courses require participants to take a much more active role in the learning process. The nature of the courses means that you must be prepared to take on greater responsibility than students enrolled in traditional classes. You will need self-discipline to stay actively involved with the course, and may find that you spend an even greater amount of time reading and preparing for this course than you do for a traditional course. Also, since you may not see the instructor face-to-face, you will need to communicate with him or her regularly through e-mail, fax, or telephone.

**What are WebCT and Blackboard?** They are software systems that allow your instructor to organize online course content and manage assignments, quizzes, and grades. The sooner you become comfortable with the commands and features, the more you will enjoy the class. Your instructor will provide you with information on how to access and navigate the system.

**What is a Chat Room?** A chat room allows individuals to type and view messages in real-time (as opposed to viewing messages at a later time in e-mail or on a bulletin board). If more than a few users are chatting at the same time, messages tend to scroll by very rapidly. For this reason, chat rooms are best used for general discussions requiring spontaneous responses.

**What is an online bulletin board or discussion group?** An online bulletin board/discussion group allows users to post messages to which other users can respond at any time. Bulletin boards normally **thread** the discussions (organize them by topic). Unlike chat rooms, bulletin boards do not require an immediate response, allowing for more thoughtful answers.



**What is a telecourse?** Telecourses include videotaped programs, textbook readings, assignments, examinations, and other requirements specified by the instructor. If you take a telecourse, you may be required to attend an initial on-campus orientation session with the instructor and/or participate in other group meetings during the semester.

*For additional information about distance education opportunities, please contact the appropriate college or university representative listed at the end of this publication.*