

Chapter 2 | Recruitment

Identifying and Recruiting Students

Introduction

This chapter guides practitioners through a process of determining who to recruit and how to reach them. When considering recruitment broadly, you need to reflect on this question: **Who are you recruiting and for what?** The answer to this question will help you decide the scope and focus of your distance education program. Will you deliver strictly distance options? Will you attempt to provide blended learning opportunities? Are you recruiting for remote face-to-face classes? The programming you want to create and the type of learner you suspect will persist will determine who you recruit.

What Audience Do You Hope to Serve Through Distance, Blended, or Remote Face-to-Face Options?

Early research literature on distance learning in adult education in the United States illustrated the importance of finding the right students and setting them up correctly if programs were to succeed in offering distance education ([Askov et al., 2003](#)). Today, when so many programs are leaning heavily on remote options, programs need to also perform outreach that ensures they can “right fit” programming to meet the needs of the students who show up.

Outreach, marketing, and communications are all components of publicizing and promoting opportunities outside of your organization. Effective recruitment communication reaches people at the right time and place. Setting a strategy before you begin is essential. The first step is to consider your goals and target audiences. Make decisions about what to communicate and to whom by answering these questions:



- Who needs to know about the learning opportunity?
- What do they need to know?
- When do they need to know?
- What actions do we want them to take?
- What are the best ways to reach them?

Also think about what it is you are offering. Are you adding distance education or blended learning to existing educational programming? If so, you need to consider how distance education and blended options will best support learners. For example, will distance courses offer new areas of instruction, or teach content parallel to classroom-based programs, but by being online offer more flexibility? Will distance courses be aimed at students already being served by the organization, or will the organization attempt to reach new audiences? These decisions should be made in the context of the organization's goals and missions, based on perceived needs of the organization's clientele, and prior to the start of the recruitment process.

What Skills Do Students Need to Be Successful? What Supports Will Help Them?

You can most efficiently use your organization's resources if you target the learner audience most likely to succeed. That is, you need to understand the technology and academic content demands of the learning resources and activities you plan to offer balanced against the support you know you can provide. Keeping this tension in mind as you craft your recruitment message will help you decide who to recruit and how.

For example, obviously an English language learner still working on literacy development would likely not succeed using learning resources pitched to Adult Secondary Education-level readers. If you know you will be relying on curated resources or a licensed curriculum that best serves that level, your recruitment messaging should make that clear. What about a student who has limited prior experience using a computer? They will surely struggle with almost any online resource, so, if you recruit them to distance options, you need to make sure you have processes and resources in place to support them, even if you are working completely remotely. If those resources are scarce, you may need to consider recruitment strategies that are likely to attract more tech-savvy learners. Being thoughtful about recruitment is important in distance education because students learning at a distance typically receive less direct social or academic support than their classroom-based counterparts.



What Characteristics Improve an Individual’s Chances of Success as a Distance Student?

Whether you are teaching in a blended, hybrid, or strictly distance format, successful students are likely to be self-motivated, are able to work independently, and possess strong study and organizational skills. Some programs have suggested that the skills needed to succeed vary depending on the model of distance education used. Students with higher academic skills, such as those studying for a high school equivalency test (e.g., GED®, HiSET exam, or TASC test), may be comfortable completing most of their studies independently. Lower-level students, those who need more support, or those who are English language learners may fare better in a blended program that combines distance education with ample face-to-face interaction; however, anyone can learn online if there is balance among the learner’s skills, the technology demands, and the support available (Silver-Pacuilla and Reder, 2008). That is, when the demands are high, either there is more support,

or the learner has the skills and proficiencies to meet the challenge.

One of the major differences between traditional classroom instruction and distance education is the amount of face-to-face contact students have with their teacher and other students. Learning is a social process, and the support of teachers and classmates can be an important element of the learning that occurs. Most teachers working in distance education (rather than blended learning models) may meet with their students only once or twice over an entire course, with the remainder of the communication occurring by telephone, by email, or through online learning communities. Additionally, distance students may have little or no face-to-face contact with other students taking the same course. This means distance students need to possess the characteristics (e.g., independence, self-motivation, and organization and study skills) that enable them to succeed without the extra support a classroom environment typically provides. Ways to determine whether or not these learners have these persistence characteristics will be discussed in Chapter 3, but your recruitment strategies can be set to target learners who potentially possess them.

What Recruitment Strategies Are Most Likely to Reach the Target Audience?

Recruiting Known Students

For blended learning, it is often best to start recruiting with your current students. Because they are known, teachers will have more information about whether they possess the characteristics described above. Some teachers figure out ways to involve their entire classroom, so recruitment is not necessary. However, blended learning for current students need not be offered to all students in a classroom. A key characteristic of blended learning is that it provides a means to personalize learning (Murphy et al., 2017), so it is ideal for supporting differentiated learning activities as a feature of your instruction. If you are hoping to intensify learning for students who have the time and inclination to do so, teachers can offer distance options to students who can take on learning online and are willing to work toward completion of online activities independently. This would be a hybrid approach, as defined in Chapter 1.

Another approach is to recruit currently enrolled learners to participate in distance education that is not directly linked to classroom instruction. In the parlance of the Murphy et al. (2017) study, this would be a supplemental model of use for an online curriculum. In the state of Minnesota, these learners are called “dual enrolled” because the work done online intensifies learning and accelerates learner progress but is led by a designated distance education teacher, not by the classroom teacher.

There are many creative ways to recruit current learners in distance education programming. Classroom demonstrations work well for showing students exactly what distance education learning resources or curricula look like. Announcements on electronic bulletin boards or posters can serve as a constant reminder that there are ways to intensify instruction. Additionally, an organization’s websites or Facebook pages can be used to communicate with existing students. No matter the method, it may be useful to build in a step requiring the learner to be proactive about entering distance education. Completing an online form, sending an email to request information, coming in to meet with a distance education teacher—these steps are all initial clues that a learner is self-motivated and engaged.

Be sure your recruitment communications employ clear language so that your messages can be more easily understood by a larger audience. Using plain language can reduce the need to clarify and reduce barriers to access for learners. “A communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information” ([International Plain Language Federation, 2019](#)).

Many of the electronic means by which to connect with current students described above can be extended to reach out to community members with basic education learning needs. Because they will naturally reach adults who are already online, you are more likely to reach potential learners with some digital literacy skills. Consider posting information about distance education on your own organization’s website, as described above. If you do so, make sure your website is attractive, easy to navigate, and frequently updated with essential information, such as how to enroll or how to get support. Make sure it has these characteristics:

- Has a clear and obvious purpose
- Covers key logistics
- Makes taking action easy
- Provides links to social media
- Is mobile friendly
- Has up-to-date content and processes in place to update
- Is clearly laid out and easy to navigate
- Appeals to human emotion
- Allows for analytics for ongoing improvement

([Making the Most of Your Nonprofit’s Website, 2019](#))

Also, consider partnerships with other institutions offering services to potential learners, such as libraries, employers, social service agencies that do not offer educational programming, or community-based organizations that want to provide educational services but do not have the resources or expertise. Ask them if they will link to online information about your program on their websites.

Students who find you through these websites are clearly interested and have at least sufficient mastery of the technology to indicate that interest. Adding online tools to your website that allow students to express interest in learning more (using scheduling tools such as Calendly) or to apply (using tools such as Google Forms) can serve as means for such a learner to express interest to your distance education program administrator. Such digital processes also serve to demonstrate adequate digital literacy skills needed for online learning. Once the student has contacted the organization, an in-person meeting can be arranged, at which the student can be pretested (according to NRS guidelines), talk about goals, and determine whether distance education is an appropriate match for the student’s educational goals and abilities. Additionally, such interorganizational collaboration can open doors to further collaboration.

Recruiting within Workforce Development Agencies and Partner Organizations

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) defines allowable or required activities for federally funded adult education programs and sets forth funding for workforce development agencies and adult education programs. A critical shift from previous federal legislation is the

requirement for unified state, local, and regional plans, in which states and local areas must articulate how they will collaborate in several key aspects. The first iterations of unified plans defining coordination of adult education and workforce development agencies went into effect on July 1, 2016. These plans are required to demonstrate collaboration that could impact the way agencies view distance education programming, particularly regarding reaching potential learners in the workforce development system.

The relevance of distance education programming for workforce development agencies can be found in the act itself. The skills required to work independently online are included in the prioritized list of Workforce Preparation Activities, defined in WIOA, Title II, as:

activities, programs, or services designed to help an individual acquire a combination of basic academic skills, critical thinking skills, digital literacy skills, and self-management skills, including competencies in utilizing resources, using information, working with others, understanding systems, and obtaining skills necessary for successful transition into and completion of postsecondary education or training, or employment.

Additionally, WIOA requires opportunities for integrated education and training programs, defining such programming as:

a service approach that provides adult education and literacy activities concurrently and contextually with workforce preparation activities and workforce training for a specific occupation or occupational cluster for the purpose of educational and career advancement.

This definition of services creates an opportunity for online basic skills development coordinated with occupational training. Consequently, distance education could be a valuable way to enact interorganizational collaboration.

Additionally, the language of Title II (the section of WIOA that defines adult education) Sec. 223 calls for state leadership activities to support “alignment” activities, naming one-stop partners (federally funded organizations that help adults find employment). Specifically, the act calls for provision of career pathways programming and is explicit about the need for collaboration across organizations.

Collaboration between an adult education provider and American Job Centers in Northwest Michigan has grown beyond recruitment to an on-site blended learning program supported by braided funding. An ABE teacher works regularly at the American Job Center and, because job counselors there know the teacher is onsite, there is a steady stream of new ABE participants.

Because these service providers are now required to provide educational services to low-literacy adults (Required Elements Report, OMB, 2016, p. 19) and many are doing so for the first time, they will perhaps be open to participating in recruitment of distance learners within their client (they call them “customer”) lists. These workforce development agencies may be looking for the expertise of adult education practitioners, and the customers they serve would perhaps welcome information about ways to build skills and knowledge while they are also seeking employment.

Finally, understanding the categorization of allowable activities and what is funded in the different sections of WIOA could help adult education programs collaborate with organizations funded under the other “Titles” of the act. For example, Title IV, which deals with Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS), is a well-funded corner of the workforce development system. VRS offers job training and employment placement services to individuals with disabilities. It serves a large pool of job seekers who may not have previously been served by Title II programs but who have basic skill needs. Requirements in WIOA Title IV include “provision of services to students and youth with disabilities to ensure that they have meaningful opportunities to receive the training and other services they need to achieve employment outcomes” (Summary Description of Title IV of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act: State Vocational Rehabilitation Program Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, 2015). Adult education could potentially partner to provide that training. For example, the limited time a learner is available to be somewhere in person could be focused on the technical skills part of a job training program, whereas the academic supports needed for things such as GED completion could

be managed and delivered by adult education via distance education. Since there is no specific dedicated funding for special needs in Title II (the part of WIOA that addresses adult education), partnerships with Title IV funded programs could be fruitful for all involved.

This has worked well in northwest Michigan. The WIOA Title II adult education provider is housed inside an American Job Center, alongside all other titled funding sources. This colocation has supported much collaboration. For example, to support an ABE student having difficulty passing a GED test without accommodations, the ABE provider partners with the Title IV provider who would pay for the costly identification screening. In another example, a high school graduate who yet has basic skills needs participates with the support of both Title II and IV programs to build skills education and get job counseling and training needed to obtain employment. In this case, Michigan Rehabilitation Services conducts on the job training, while the adult education provider concurrently provides the basic skills training specifically targeting skills needed in the chosen job.

Planning for Learner Recruitment

Activity 2.1 Characteristics Supporting Student Success

Think about what skills, experience, and dispositions students will need to be successful in your distance or blended education program, based on the curriculum and materials you will be using and your programmatic distance education goals.

To get an idea of how you will handle the tension of finding learners who are likely to succeed given the resources and activities you offer, the supports you can sustain, and the need to support “all comers,” consider details for a distance course or blended learning opportunity you will be offering. List course-specific requirements, and for each one, describe the material and technology access issues for the course and the characteristics students need to possess to be successful. The more specific you are in detailing what you think the student will need, the more focused you can be in your recruitment for this course.

Activity 2.2 Identifying the Target Audience

Identify the different places and the means by which you might find learners with the characteristics you identified in Activity 2.1.

Note that in the course, IDEAL 101: Foundations of Distance Education and Blended Learning, these prompts are expanded into fully developed collaborative activities for your team to complete together.

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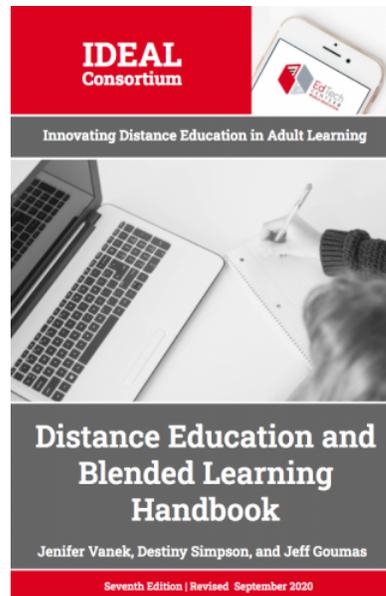
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