# Ten Efficient Research Strategies for Distance Learning

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## Abstract

Today's distance education administrator, frequently with an expertise in another academic discipline, is also supposed to be a distance education scholar. This expectation results from the recent interest in distance learning that nearly all institutions of learning and disciplines of study have shown. More research, studies, journals, and essays about distance education also exist than at any other time.

A distance education administrator and an education research librarian at Brigham Young University have teamed up to identify ten pragmatic research strategies to help new, busy, and even a few experienced distance education administrators stay current in their field and successful in their applied research. All distance education research strategies identified were required to pass a distance administrator test for pragmatism, user-friendliness, and efficiency.

The ten research strategies that will be covered are accessing library expertise, books from your or others' library catalogs, academic journals, databases, current awareness services, subscription services, distance education Web portals, associations, listserv/discussions, and use of research assistants.

## Introduction

Distance education administrators, like university administrators, frequently come from the diverse faculty ranks. Frequently, the distance education administrative position is a temporary assignment; after a few years of service, another faculty member will receive the assignment. It would surprise no one that distance education administrators face steep learning curves as they integrate themselves into the field of distance education and are almost always overwhelmed with the administrative responsibilities necessary to keep their own distance education program successful. This article is written for the new and busy distance education administrator in North America who needs to stay current in the field of distance education and conduct occasional research.

The following two scenarios will sound familiar to distance education administrators to whom this writing is directed.

*Scenario 1. The director of distance learning is in the middle of a staff meeting when his cell*

*phone vibrates. He wasn't planning to answer the call until he notices "Office of the President" on the caller ID. He quickly excuses himself from the staff meeting and asks his assistant to cover some of the housekeeping items on the agenda in his absence.*

*The president, obviously in a hurry, asks the director if he could help her do some research she will need in a meeting with the trustees one week from today. The president explains that one of the trustees has some distance education background and is interested in knowing how this university's program stacks up in mentoring support for students against other distance education programs.*

*The director thinks to himself after the president hangs up: "Where am I going to get the time to devote to this research project? I have a program to run, reports to complete by next week, and employees to keep happy-I'm strapped for time already. Where do I begin? It has been at least eight years since I have done any research, and I am rusty at best."*

*Scenario 2. The chief academic officer for the university calls a professor into his office and announces that the search committee had just selected her, a tenured social work professor, as the new director of distance learning at their university. He tells the professor that she will love her new position, that much is expected, and that her academic dean and department chair have already been authorized to hire a replacement faculty member. This will definitely be a rapid transition!*

*The professor accepts the position-after all, she applied for it-and immediately begins to ask herself where to start. The former director of the program has already moved out of state and will not be much help. She needs to start somewhere. What resources does she have at her disposal?*

(The authors will return briefly to these scenarios in the "Conclusion" section of this article. The reader may also want to try and match some of the research strategies introduced throughout the article with the scenarios described.)

This article represents the "final" compromise between the backgrounds and interests of its two authors: one a university librarian and the other a distance education administrator. This practical, efficient, tempered focus on distance education research-for which the administrator adopts the philosophy that "less is more,"-might not be sufficient for all distance education researchers, but it is a good start for those who are new or just haven't had time to do much research until now. Comprehensive distance education bibliographies and research guides are available (Wang and Liu, 2003), but the authors hope that the focus on these research strategies will equip administrators with the tools necessary to make the informed decisions their position demands.

The ten research strategies that will be covered are accessing library expertise, using research assistants, reviewing books from your library catalog, journals, databases, and consulting current awareness services, subscription services, distance education Web portals, associations, and listserv/discussion groups. Only one of the ten research strategies is considered more important than the rest, and that is where we begin.

## Accessing Library Expertise

The most important research strategy for a distance education administrator is contacting the university's education librarian. Librarians are not only an overlooked resource of tremendous

value to some university faculty, but even more so to distance education administrators. Librarians, by their very role at a university, specialize in knowing what is current and available in their subject area, how best to access it, and how to best provide patron support, e.g., interlibrary loan, faculty delivery, and related services to the administrator. Their satisfaction derives from patron success: finding what patrons need and in helping patrons advance their area of research. Recent literature also encourages librarians to keep administrators in mind as key clients (Basefsky, 2000). The idea and need for this article came from this very situation: a distance education administrator sought research help on a topic from the university's education librarian who specializes in education.

Perhaps none of the librarians at your university or college are immediate experts in the field of distance education, but they are experts at retrieving information and adapting quickly to other disciplines, including distance education. Librarians are also a close-knit team of professionals, and what they do not know they can find out quickly through their own library community and network. Librarians pride themselves on delivering timely and comprehensive information to their patrons-so give them a chance! Two suggestions: first, treat your librarians as professionals and as a part of your research team-they will live up to your expectations and invariably surprise you with their contributions. Second, librarians enjoy occasional working lunches with the distance education administrators who need their help. (The librarian coauthor insists that the reader know it was the administrator who wrote this section, not the librarian!)

## Using Research Assistants

Many university students, particularly graduate students, are looking for mentored research opportunities, research projects, and internships. One posting on a graduate student board or listserv or one call to the academic department chair or secretary may frequently yield surprising results, both in the short term and sometimes even in the long term, when the administrator ends up hiring the now-graduated student as a full-time employee. Administrators may reason: I don't have the time to supervise a research assistant. I can't justify those part-time student wages. I might embarrass myself at trying to keep ahead of a bright student, since my own research methods are dated. Just try it and find out how quickly fears and concerns are dispelled. Many administrators actually find their few minutes spent each week receiving updates from their research assistant as the most anticipated and enjoyable. As for justifying the research cost of an assistant, many university students (sometime a whole class) will volunteer to help conduct research as part of an assignment, receiving internship or university credit or even seeking ideas and opportunity for their thesis or dissertation. Imagine two or three students spending ten hours a week for a full semester, with the help of a faculty committee, researching distance education questions and issues that will help inform your own work as an administrator. Furthermore, if a research assistant is hired at the student-wage level for the current semester, the expectations need be only short-term and temporary.

## Books from Your Library Catalog

Easy access to literature on distance education is available through your library catalog. If your university has a librarian responsible for collecting in this area, you will likely receive the most recently published books on distance education. If this is not the case, you can always log on to a library catalog for some major distance education research universities, such as Penn State and the University of Maryland. Their focus on the field will allow you to keep up on the latest publications.

Two simple search strategies will allow you to review the library's collection. One is to type

"distance education" in the search box and select "title" as the field in which to search for these words. This obviously will retrieve all items that have "distance education" in their title. Since numerous books are being published on distributed learning, online learning, virtual classrooms, etc., another strategy is to take the same search term, "distance education," and select "subject" as the field in which to search. This will collect a number of other items on distance education without explicitly using the term in the title. Library catalogs usually sort their results by date, so you look at the most recently released books at the top of your list. In Figure 1, a typical search screen illustrates a search for books that contain "distance education" in the title; in Figure 2, the results of the search yield 338 titles within the library that have "distance education" included in the title.

**Figure 1. [Library search screen for phrase "distance education" in title](#)**

**Figure 2. [Results of search using "distance education" in title](#)**

## Journals

The literature in distance education is distributed across hundreds of journals. We discuss how to access this literature under the "Database" section. However, it is important to identify some of the major journals for the discipline. For our purposes, we have selected journals that would contain information most relevant to North America distance education administrators. Many of the journal descriptions listed below are taken immediately from the Web sites associated with each journal.

*American Journal of Distance Education*
[http://www.ajde.com/](http://www.ajde.com/)
Formerly published by the American Center for the Study of Distance Education (ACSDE), the American Journal of Distance Education is published by Lawrence Erlbaum. Created to disseminate information and act as a forum for criticism and debate about research and practice of distance education in the Americas, it is offered three times a year to 1,400 subscribers. It is indexed in most educational databases.

*Chronicle of Higher Education*
[http://chronicle.com/](http://chronicle.com/)
The Chronicle of Higher Education, though not officially a journal, is the academic worlds' chief source of news and information. It is published weekly and read by more than 450,000 college and university administrators and faculty members. Every issue has a section on "Information Technology." Articles on distance education regularly appear in this section. The Chronicle's subscription service includes free access to its entire Web site, including in-depth articles on specific topic areas.

*Continuing Higher Education Review*
[http://www.ucea.edu/publications02.htm](http://www.ucea.edu/publications02.htm)
Published annually by Harvard University and the University of Continuing Education (UCEA) professional journal, CHEReview contains scholarly articles by experts in continuing education, research reports, and book reviews. Designed for administrators, faculty, and policy-makers in continuing education, the journal seeks to narrow the gap between theory and practice. CHER is distributed to approximately three thousand subscribers each year.

*DEOSNEWS*
http://www.ed.psu.edu/acsde/deos/deosnews/deosnews.asp
This monthly electronic journal, published by the American Center for the Study of Distance Education (ACSDE) at Pennsylvania State University, has been promoting distance education scholarship, research, and practice since 1991. This electronic journal is accessed by more than five thousand subscribers from eighty countries. Beginning January 2004, DEOSNEWS will be published to the ACSDE Web site each month.

*International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*
http://www.irrodl.org/
First published in July 2000, IRRODL is a refereed, interactive online journal. Its purpose is to contribute and disseminate scholarly knowledge on international distance education in theory, research, and best practices. This journal has 6,283 online subscribers as of this writing; and as a sampling of online activity for one day, November 11, 2003, there were 9,387 hits and 568 articles downloaded and printed.

*Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks (JALN)*
http://www.aln.org/publications/jaln/index.asp
The Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks (JALN) is published online by Vanderbilt University for the Asynchronous Learning Networks (ALN) Center. It includes original work in asynchronous learning networks (ALN), including experimental results. Papers that emphasize results, backed by data, are the norm. Occasionally, papers reviewing broad areas are published, including critical reviews of thematic areas. Entire issues are published from time to time around single-topic or disciplinary areas. The journal is now a major resource for knowledge about online learning. It received over 110,000 hits to its Web site in 2003.

*Journal of Continuing Higher Education*
http://www.acheinc.org/publicat.html#journal
Published by the Association for Continuing Higher Education (ACHE) at Pennsylvania State, JCHE is a refereed journal, published three times a year, that features major articles and shorter columns of professional interest. It strives to support continuing higher education by serving as a forum for the reporting and exchange of information based on research, observations, and experience relevant to the field. JCHE has 2,100 subscribers.

*Journal of Distance Education*
http://www.cade-aced.ca/en_pub.php
JDE is published twice yearly to 775 subscribers. As a publication of the Canadian Association for Distance Education (CADE) its aim is to promote and encourage scholarly work of an empirical and theoretical nature that relates to distance education in Canada.

*Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*
http://www.westga.edu/~distance/jmain11.html
This peer-reviewed online journal is published four times each year by the State University of West Georgia, Center for Distance Education. The journal welcomes manuscripts based on original work of practitioners and researchers with specific focus or implications for the management of distance education programs. Activity at the journal Web site is measured in "pageviews." During a recent week in November 2003, there were over twelve hundred pageviews.

*Quarterly Review of Distance Education*
http://www.aect.org/Publications/qrde.htm

The official journal of the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT), the Quarterly Review of Distance Education is a refereed journal that publishes articles, research briefs, reviews, and editorials on the theories, research, and practices of distance education. It is published quarterly to five hundred subscribers.

**Databases**

Not that long ago, it was typical for distance education administrators to trek to their library to page through volumes of indices that contained references to relevant journal articles. Many of these volumes now sit unused, relics of a different era, while administrators-turned-occasional-researchers log on to their computers from office or home to search the online equivalent to the print index. Scores of these online databases provide indexing, abstracts, and, increasingly, full-text access to articles from thousands of journals. This, of course, allows researchers to canvass the full landscape of journals and other relevant databases. Using a journal database is particularly valuable in distance education because the literature is distributed across so many different educational journals.

Created in 1966, ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center) has been the archetypal database. ERIC broke new ground in indexing journal articles and other documents pertaining to education. Today, this database is available in most libraries and through its own Web site at http://www.eric.ed.gov/. An invaluable creation of the ERIC organization was its thesaurus. Success in searching an index, especially today's online versions, depends on the correct choice of words. ERIC created a system by which official "descriptors" or subject headings were selected to help the user "collect" the appropriate literature. The term "Distance Education" was adopted on October 24, 1983 by ERIC. By using the appropriate descriptor, the user can have confidence that his/her term will pull in most articles on that particular topic. This thesaurus, created under the direction of the Department of Education, was originally offered in print along with the ERIC indices; it now accompanies any online version of the ERIC database. In Figure 3, the ERIC online thesaurus for the term "distance education" reveals the broader term, "education"; the narrower term, "correspondence study"; and 25 related terms.

**Figure 3. The Eric online thesaurus for "distance education"**

Additional information on how to interpret this ERIC output for distance education is found visiting the ERIC Web site, http://www.eric.ed.gov/.

It is quickly evident how the thesaurus can indicate relations between terms and suggest other terms for exploration. In the case of "distance education" it is worth noting that in 1990, seven years after being introduced, 1,260 entries in the database carried that heading. By 1995 the number of citations had grown to 2,709. Today, eight thousand entries in the ERIC database deal with "distance education."

Language is dynamic and will change over time. As an example, in Figure 3, one of the related terms listed for distance education was the term/phrase, "computer-mediated communication," which did not even exist in the 1990 thesaurus but did in the 1995 thesaurus. Today, "distance education" is still the term of choice in searches for literature in the field. However, new terms, such as "distributed learning" or "distributed education," are emerging in the literature as part of the distance education discussion, although they have yet to be officially adopted by ERIC as of this writing. New terms are clearly smaller subsets of the literature but should be noted as

research in the field expands and evolves. The ERIC terms discussed and illustrated above can be applied to other databases as well.

The authors have selected four online databases that offer significant coverage of journal literature in distance education. Each database was searched recently using the terms "distance education" and "higher education." The results of this search, or "hits," are references to journal articles that discuss distance education as it pertains to higher education, a subset of all the distance education literature. The number of hits is listed directly after the database name. A short description of the resource follows:

> ERIC, 4,382 hits. ERIC indexes over seven hundred journals relating to education.
>
> Education Full Text (Wilson), 782 hits. This is the online version of the old "Education Index." It indexes and abstracts a core group of 430 international periodicals, yearbooks, and selected books in education.
>
> Academic Search Elite, 154 hits. This "Ebsco" product is more multidisciplinary in nature, indexing nearly 2,880 academic, social sciences, humanities, general science, education, and multicultural journals.
>
> Digital Dissertation (Dissertation Abstracts), 314 hits. Dissertation Abstracts, maintained by Proquest/UMI is the single authoritative source for information about doctoral dissertations and master's theses. It contains over 1.6 million entries, with 47,000 new additions yearly. Proquest offers a subscription package that allows users to download most dissertations published after 1996. It is clear that "distance education" is a frequent topic of research. Although not strictly a journal database, this resource can be very helpful in keeping up with the latest scholarly information in the field. Dissertations and theses provide a helpful review of the literature and extensive bibliographies, saving many researchers countless hours in this important exercise.

## Current Awareness Services

Current Awareness Services and Selected Dissemination of Information (SDI) are the phrases used today to describe the modernization of article clipping services for academic researchers. Libraries have used these services for many years (Schlembach, 2001). In Figure 4, distance education administrators can sign up for automated alerts to be sent to their own e-mail address for all new articles made available each week across many journals that match a keyword phrase like "distance education" or for the table of contents and articles for any pre-selected journals. This concept is particularly relevant to the distance education administrator who needs to stay current in his or her reading while not spending hours looking for the best material.

**Figure 4. Ingenta's e-journal, search, and table of content (TOC) alerts (used by permission).**

Many individual database providers (Ebsco, Ovid, Ingenta), publishers (Taylor/Francis, Erlbaum), and even individual journals now allow distance education administrators to request alert messages by e-mail as often as weekly. In Figure 5, the administrator who signed up to receive an Ingenta keyword phrase, "distance education," search receives e-mail notification weekly for all journals in the database that contain those keywords, "distance education." In Figure 6, the administrator who signed up to receive the Ingenta table of contents alerts for a

journal receives email notification shortly after the most recent issue of that journal is released. In Figure 7, the administrator clicks one of the interested articles, "A Comprehensive Look at Online Student Support Services for Distance Learners."

Figure 5. Keyword phrase, "Distance Education," e-mail for search across all journals in Ingenta database.

Figure 6. Table of Contents e-mail for newest release of The American Journal of Distance Education.

Figure 7. Full reference and abstract for article selected in Figure 6 (used by permission).

These current awareness services allow distance education administrators to conveniently receive tables of contents of preselected journals and search results canvassing hundreds of journals for articles on any given subject.

The few minutes it takes to set up these services will pay off richly for the otherwise occupied administrator. In Figure 8, the local interlibrary loan service is used to request a copy (electronic or hard) of the same article listed in Figure 7. This interlibrary loan service, offered at no cost at most libraries, can also minimize subscription costs for the distance education administrator with a limited budget.

Figure 8. Interlibrary loan request for an article of interested identified through the Current Awareness Service.

**Subscription Services**

The remarkable growth of distance education institutions and services in recent years has spawned subscription services whose target clientele is the busy distance education administrator or practitioner. The objective of these services is similar to that of a news clearinghouse such as Associated Press, which provides timely digests of current distance education news and research. The two most comprehensive services have different business models but provide similar kinds of information. Distance Education Report (http://www.magnapubs.com), published by Magna Publications, has taken the proprietary information approach and charges an annual fee of $399 U.S. (as of 2003) to institutions to receive its biweekly report, whereas DistanceEducator.com (http://www.distance-educator.com) provides daily e-mail updates at "no direct cost" to subscribers, although readership is now exposed to advertisements by vendors who purchase space on the online newsletter. Distance Education Report has slightly over one thousand subscribers; DistanceEducator.com has eight thousand subscribers.

**Distance Education Web Portals**

Web portals have been described in a number of ways, but for our purposes they are Web sites that act as a doorway or gateway (thus portal) to an information environment that gathers related materials, knowledge, and locations for the user. Not surprisingly, some portals provide this clearinghouse functionality better than others. There are numerous distance education Web sites. Our list is more selective than inclusive. We have found that a few high-quality portals will connect the user with the same amount of information as would a larger number of lesser-quality sites. We list the following distance education Web portals with short descriptions of their scope and content-some of them taken directly from the Web portal site:

*Distance Education Clearinghouse*
http://www.uwex.edu/disted/
This popular distance education site, launched in 1995, is maintained by the University of

Wisconsin Extension. Its sections include the following: (1.) introducing distance education, (2.) keeping current (news), (3.) program and courses, (4.) technology, (5.) teaching and learning, (6.) research, (7.) policies and guidelines, (8.) distance education community, and (9.) learning environment.

*SHEEO (State Higher Education Executive Officers) Distance Education Resources*
http://www.sheeo.org/helinks/disted-links.htm
The distance education section of SHEEO has two parts: (1.) a collection of links to journals, associations, other Web sites, and policy and (2.) links to distance education sites for the various states.

*Distance Educator.Com*
http://www.distance-educator.com/
Founded by Professor Farhad Saba of San Diego State University, this site is one of the most comprehensive. It offers an impressive range of resources, including readings, news, conferences, and online courses. In the true spirit of a portal, DistanceEducator.com offers a well organized section of links to Web sites related to distance education.

*Learning Resources*
http://www.adec.edu/online-resources.html
Maintained at the University of Nebraska by the American Distance Education Consortium (ADEC), this site offers more than you might be looking for. However, administrators might find a number of links worth exploring.

*ICDL (International Centre for Distance Learning) Literature Database*
http://www-icdl.open.ac.uk/lit2k/
This is UK in its orientation, but it does include regional (including North America) divisions. This well-organized site offers access to book listings, conference papers and proceedings, reports, and selected journal articles. The user can browse by format or search the site by topic.

*Google Distance Learning Directory*
http://directory.google.com/Top/Reference/Education/Distance_Learning/
Using Google's new directory, users can browse links within distance learning categories including associations, conferences, forums, and research. This site is easy to navigate and is updated regularly.

*Minnesota Virtual University Distance Education Resources*
http://www.mnvu.org/mnvu/2230.jsp
This site serves as the Minnesota official gateway to distance education resources. It lists a number of the sites already mentioned. A valuable feature is the extremely comprehensive Lorne's distance education bibliography.

**Associations**

In North America, a few national associations provide community for distance education practitioners and scholars. Many of these associations also sponsor annual conferences. A cursory review of the Web sites for these associations reveals archives of past conferences and frequently a listing of staff members, many of whom are accessible for questions about best practices and research from its membership. Most of these associations have free or nominal membership fees-some of which are included in the conference fee.

*University Continuing Education Association* http://www.ucea.edu/
*American Association for Collegiate Independent Study* http://www.aacis.org/
*Western Cooperative for Education Telecommunications*
http://www.wcet.info/about/
*The American Distance Education Consortium* http://www.adec.edu/
*The Sloan Consortium* http://www.aln.ucf.edu/

## Listserv/Discussion

Another valuable research strategy is distance education listserv participation. Associations described earlier, such as, UCEA Communities of Practice and AACIS, will often sponsor online discussions or e-mail exchanges as a way to network members who can provide quick responses to queries. DEOS-L http://lists.psu.edu/archives/deos-l.html (The Distance Education Online Symposium), though not sponsored by an association, is currently the most active distance education listserv, averaging about seven e-mails each day. It has thousands of subscribers worldwide and is managed by the American Center for the Study of Distance Education at Penn State.

If a member posts a question to the list about current research, responses are often received within 24 hours, which frequently include research findings, bibliographies, and further contact information. At the time of this writing, author Howell happened to be researching a topic that one of the listserv members inquired about, and he was able to provide this member a current bibliography the same day.

Now we return to our two scenarios. . . .

*In the first situation, the director of distance learning was asked to come up with some information on mentoring support for students-the next week no less! He contacted the education librarian who shared with him this article and then helped the distance learning administrator conduct some database searches on the subject. Together, they identified in no less than an hour several relevant articles that they electronically retrieved. With articles in hand, the director sent an email to the DEOS-L listserv inquiring how other institutions were providing mentoring support to their distance education students. To his delight, he received several responses the next couple days providing enough comparative information to at least be prepared to inform the president of what a couple other institutions were doing. Assuming that this might be an ongoing concern, the distance learning administrator then set up an keyword search (distance education and student mentoring) in Ingenta (Current Awareness Service) that would be conducted every thirty days. The president was pleased and the distance education administrator reassured in his ability to quickly research the needed information.*

*In our second scenario, a new director is faced with that steep learning curve and wonders where to begin. Again, she did need look any further than the university library and this article to start with. A quick perusal of the catalog revealed several reference books on distance education that promised to quickly orient her on the major issues and most current research topics in the discipline. Her subscription to the DEOS-L listserv and new membership in several associations has helped her monitor current discussions and conference proceedings. She is now familiar with several distance education Web portals and knows how to find just the right information she needs when she needs it. She has also introduced herself to the university's education librarian and already received a tutorial on effective database searching for journal articles and dissertations from this librarian. After a few weeks, she already feels much better about her new position; the curve doesn't appear to be as steep as she first thought.*

## Conclusion

As the new or busy distance education administrator tries to keep up with the heavy load of administration, the self- or externally imposed need to research distance education topics arises. The evolving nature of distance education demands a fully informed administrator. This article has identified ten pragmatic strategies that the new, busy, and even experienced administrator may apply.

Perhaps the distance education administrator is satisfied by subscribing to one current awareness service and regularly visiting a few Web portals. Perhaps subscribing to a listserv and networking through various associations is all the administrator requires to stay current. However, when an administrator's special research need arises, a librarian's expertise and an enthusiastic research assistant may just be the right combination.

The authors believe that any or all of these ten practical and efficient research strategies may prove useful. While the more sophisticated and focused distance education researcher will move beyond some of these strategies, those discussed herein are still foundational to research within the field of distance education. We leave it to the new, busy, and even experienced distance education administrator to select the research strategy(ies) that best suit his or her needs and available institutional resources.

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