
ISSUE REVIEW

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Distance Learning in Postsecondary Education

ISSUE

This **Issue Review** examines the growth of distance education at Iowa's Regents universities and community colleges and provides a national context.

AFFECTED AGENCIES

Board of Regents and Regents universities

Community colleges

CODE AUTHORITY

Iowa Code chapter [260C](#)

Iowa Code chapter [262](#)

INTRODUCTION

Distance learning plays an increasing role in postsecondary education, and every higher education institution has a wide variety of options for how to incorporate distance learning. Institutions may choose to offer only limited distance education as a feature of traditional face-to-face courses, while other institutions offer entire degree programs online. With that variety and the rate of change in mind, it is difficult to find comparable data across institutions or even sectors to provide a point-in-time snapshot of distance education or to compare institutions.

This **Issue Review** looks at national comparative data compiled by the Digital Learning Compass partnership; identifies laws, policies, and accreditation requirements that govern distance education in Iowa; provides the most recent distance enrollment data from Iowa's public universities and community colleges; and looks at Iowa's ranking nationally in regard to certain distance enrollment statistics. The **Issue Review** then looks at the cost of offering distance education by using the results of a random survey of individuals involved in offering postsecondary distance education in the U.S. and anecdotal information provided by the Regents institutions and community colleges in Iowa. Finally, the **Issue Review** identifies some future considerations and challenges facing distance learning in higher education.

This **Issue Review** uses the IPEDS definition of a distance course as one "in which the instructional content is delivered exclusively via distance education. Requirements for coming

to campus for orientation, testing, or academic support services do not exclude a course from being classified as distance education.”¹

NATIONAL GROWTH IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

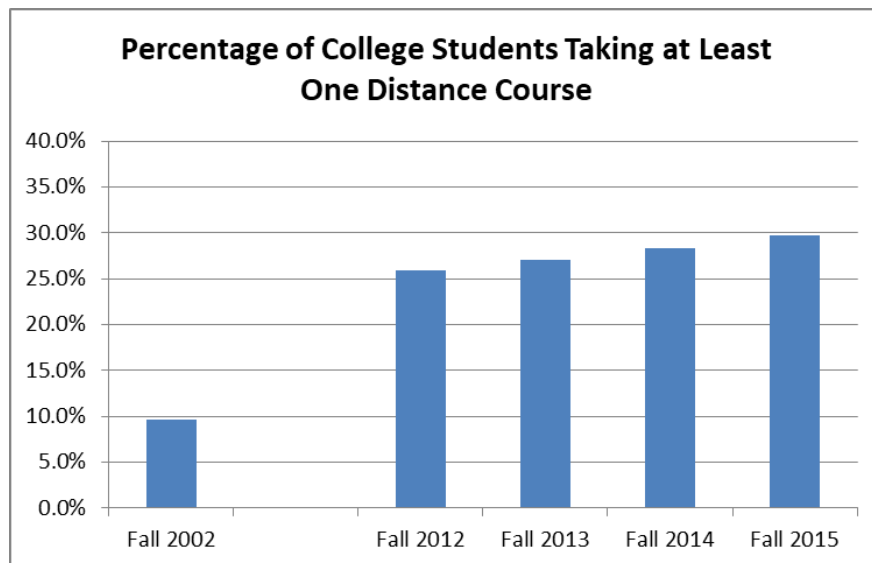
In May 2017, the Digital Learning Compass issued its *Distance Education Enrollment Report 2017*.² The Digital Learning Compass is a partnership between Babson Survey Research Group, the weblog e-Literate, and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) Cooperative for Educational Technologies (WCET).

Using data from the U.S. Department of Education’s Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), the report found that in fall 2002, 1.6 million students were taking at least one distance course. By 2015, the number had grown to 6.0 million, although the rate of growth has slowed since 2012.

Comparatively, the report found that total enrollment (all methods of delivery), which had been increasing steadily between 2002 and 2012, had decreased by 662,000 students (3.2%) between 2012 and 2015.

At Least One Distance Course. By 2015, approximately 14.3% of all higher education students took all of their courses exclusively at a distance, while another 15.4% took some distance courses. Of those taking at least one distance course, the vast majority were undergraduates. **Chart 1** shows the percentage of college students taking at least one distance course in Fall 2002 and Fall 2012 through Fall 2015.

Chart 1



Distance Education by Institutional Sector. In 2015, 17.8% of students taking at least one distance course attended private nonprofit institutions, and 14.5% attended for-profit institutions. The majority (67.8%) attended public institutions (see **Chart 2**). Of those attending public

¹U.S. Dept. of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, nces.ed.gov/ipeds (last visited November 27, 2017).

²Elaine Allen and Jeff Seaman, *Digital Learning Compass: Distance Education Enrollment Report 2017*, www.digitallearningcompass.org/download-report (last visited November 20, 2017).

institutions, 55.3% were at four-year institutions, while 44.7% were enrolled at two-year institutions.

Chart 2

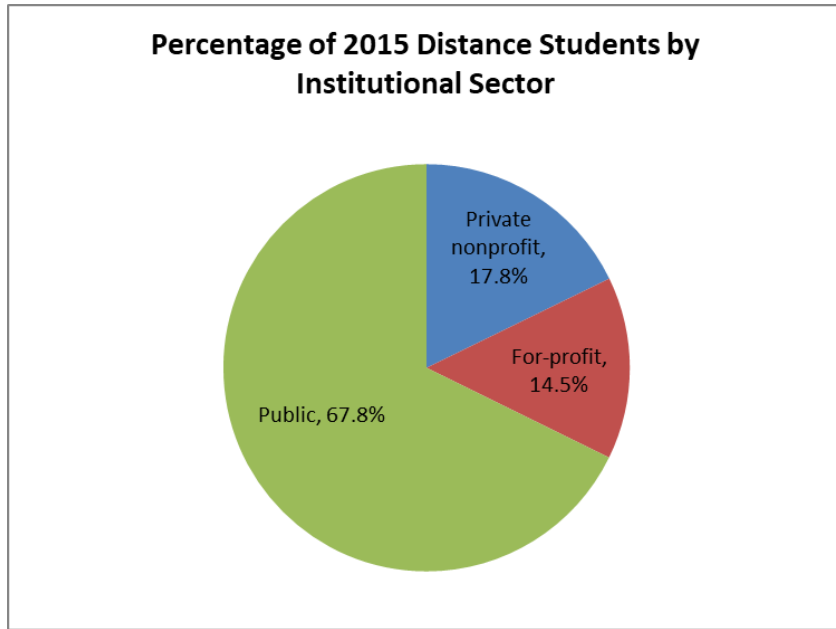
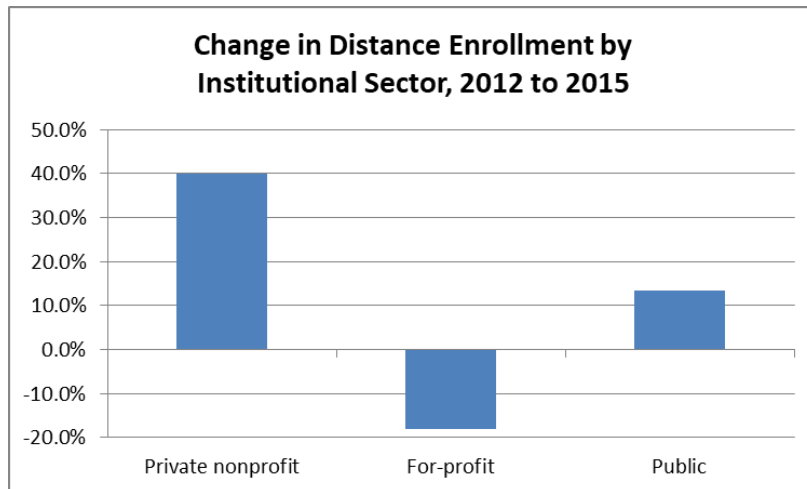


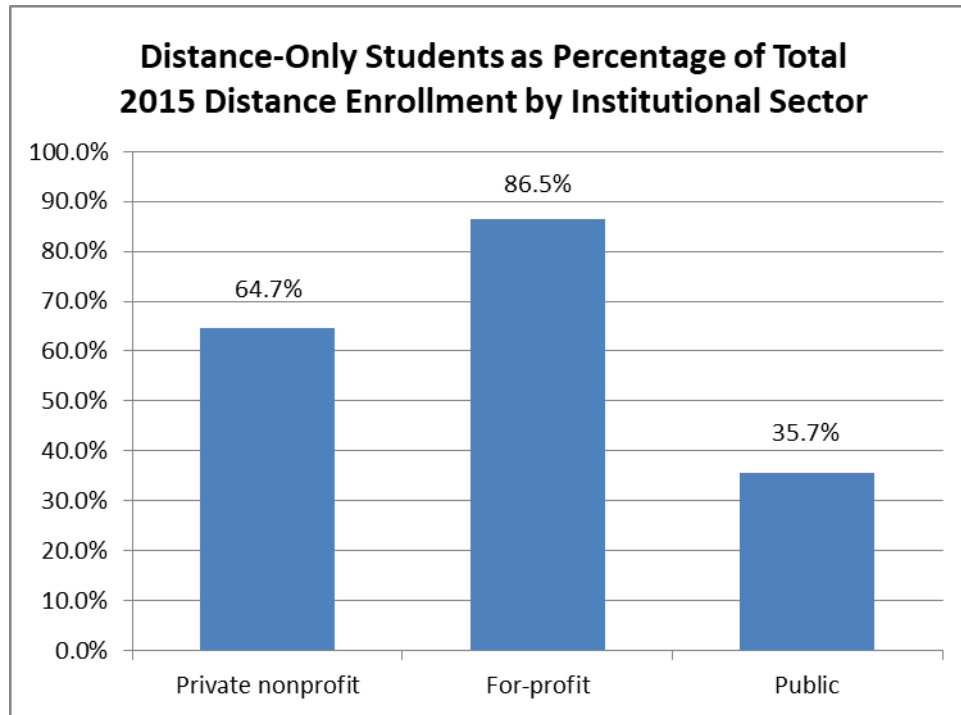
Chart 3 shows the change in distance enrollment by sector between 2012 and 2015. The greatest growth was in the private nonprofit sector, responding to increased interest by students and, in some cases, opportunities to partner with nonprofit and for-profit organizations to offer distance learning affordably and control rising tuition rates. At the same time, distance enrollment in the for-profit sector decreased, most likely due to increasing pressure from regulators with concerns about educational quality, employability of graduates, and the use of state and federal student aid.

Chart 3



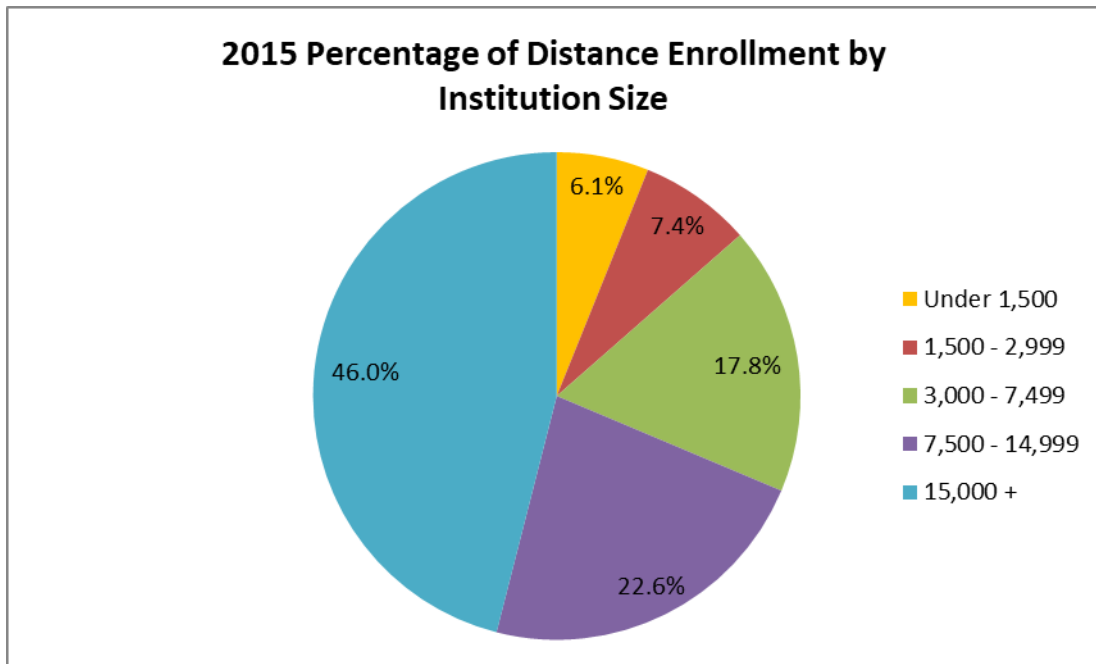
Distance-Only Students. Of the 6.0 million students taking at least one distance course in 2015, nearly half (48.2%) were taking only distance courses, and half of those students were enrolled in public institutions. Yet, distance-only students made up a significantly smaller proportion of distance enrollment in public institutions than in the private nonprofit and private for-profit sectors. **Chart 4** shows distance-only students as a percentage of total distance enrollment in 2015, broken down by sector.

Chart 4



Distance Enrollment by Institution Size. The largest institutions, those with 15,000 or more students, make up only 7.1% of all active degree-granting institutions. Yet, as shown in **Chart 5**, those institutions enrolled nearly half (46.0%) of all distance students in 2015.

Chart 5



DISTANCE EDUCATION GOVERNANCE IN IOWA

Distance education in Iowa is governed, in large part, by the same laws and regulations that apply to face-to-face delivery of education. Most governance related specifically to distance delivery occurs at the college or program level.

Statutory Provisions: The Iowa Code addresses distance education in higher education only in regard to the College Student Aid Commission and the registration of postsecondary institutions that wish to offer distance education to Iowa residents. The subject of postsecondary registration pertains primarily to institutions without a physical presence in the State, so it is not directly applicable to this ***Issue Review***. The costs to Iowa public institutions for registration under the State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement (SARA) in order to offer distance education in other SARA states is addressed later in this document.

Accreditation Requirements: The State's three public universities and 15 community colleges are governed by the accreditation standards of the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), which also participates in the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC). Guidelines for the evaluation of distance education have been developed by the C-RAC and can be found in detail [here](#). The document cites the "hallmarks of quality" in distance education as follows:

1. Online learning is appropriate to the institution's mission and purposes.
2. The institution's plans for developing, sustaining, and, if appropriate, expanding online learning offerings are integrated into its regular planning and evaluation processes.
3. Online learning is incorporated into the institution's systems of governance and academic oversight.
4. Curricula for the institution's online learning offerings are coherent, cohesive, and comparable in academic rigor to programs offered in traditional instructional formats.

5. The institution evaluates the effectiveness of its online learning offerings, including the extent to which the online learning goals are achieved, and uses the results of its evaluations to enhance the attainment of the goals.
6. Faculty responsible for delivering the online learning curricula and evaluating the students' success in achieving the online learning goals are appropriately qualified and effectively supported.
7. The institution provides effective student and academic services to support students enrolled in online learning offerings.
8. The institution provides sufficient resources to support and, if appropriate, expand its online learning offerings.
9. The institution assures the integrity of its online offerings.

The HLC [policy](#) regarding the determination of credit hours, program length, and tuition does not differentiate between in-person and distance education.

The HLC also requires institutions it accredits to follow federal guidelines regarding verification of the identity of students participating in distance education. The HLC policy regarding identity verification can be found [here](#).

Regents Universities: The Board of Regents Policy Manual Chapter [3.12](#) defines distance education at the three State universities in keeping with the HLC's requirements and specifies that the institutions should undertake distance learning initiatives to the extent that resources allow. The policy requires that distance programs be of high quality and that the universities cooperate and collaborate with other Regents and non-Regents institutions to benefit stakeholders.

In addition, at the institutional level, each department offering distance education establishes standards for courses and programs. This includes procedures to prevent cheating. Faculty are trained in techniques like random assignment of test questions, the use of web-based tools, and the use of timed sections on quizzes or exams to reduce the opportunity for cheating. Faculty also often use the testing website ProctorU (www.proctoru.com), which uses a multistep verification process, to proctor exams and reduce cheating. All students, regardless of the mode of instruction, are held to institutional academic integrity standards.

Community Colleges: Each of Iowa's 15 community colleges establishes its own policies regarding distance education. Those policies generally address such issues as class size; instructor training; compensation for instructors who design online courses; and student requirements, such as online orientation and technology requirements.

Specifically in regard to cheating, each of the colleges requires all students to meet standards of academic integrity. ProctorU is a common online resource for proctoring exams to reduce the opportunity for cheating, and many, if not all, of the colleges offer distance students the option of going to a proctoring location for exams. Instructors and students also receive training in regard to plagiarism, and at least one college reports that instructors there have access to plagiarism detection software.

The Department of Education provides oversight and State accreditation of the community colleges. The Department's administrative rules address residency status and tuition in [281 IAC 21.2\(11\)"a"\(3\)](#) and assignment of credit hours in [IAC 281 IAC 21.2\(12\)"f"\(2\)](#). The Department relies on the HLC's accreditation process to address the monitoring of course and program outcomes and methods.

While eight of the community colleges handle their distance programs individually, the other seven formed a consortium in December 1999 to collaborate in developing and delivering quality distance education. The Iowa Community College Online Consortium (ICCO)C [website](#) lists seven guiding principles:

- Incorporate institutional missions of all consortium partners.
- Combine existing resources, including faculty, services, staff, and information technology, at all member colleges.
- Ensure academic rigor and quality in all courses and the overall program.
- Provide staffing to accommodate the needs of students, instructors, staff, and the ICCOC in general.
- Provide standards and accountability for the development and delivery of online courses, as well as student assessment.
- Provide processes and mechanisms for evaluating all aspects of the program, including technology, student services, and instructors.
- Administer a website to deliver student services, serve as a faculty training resource, and provide current and accurate information to all users.

The colleges participating in the ICCOC are:

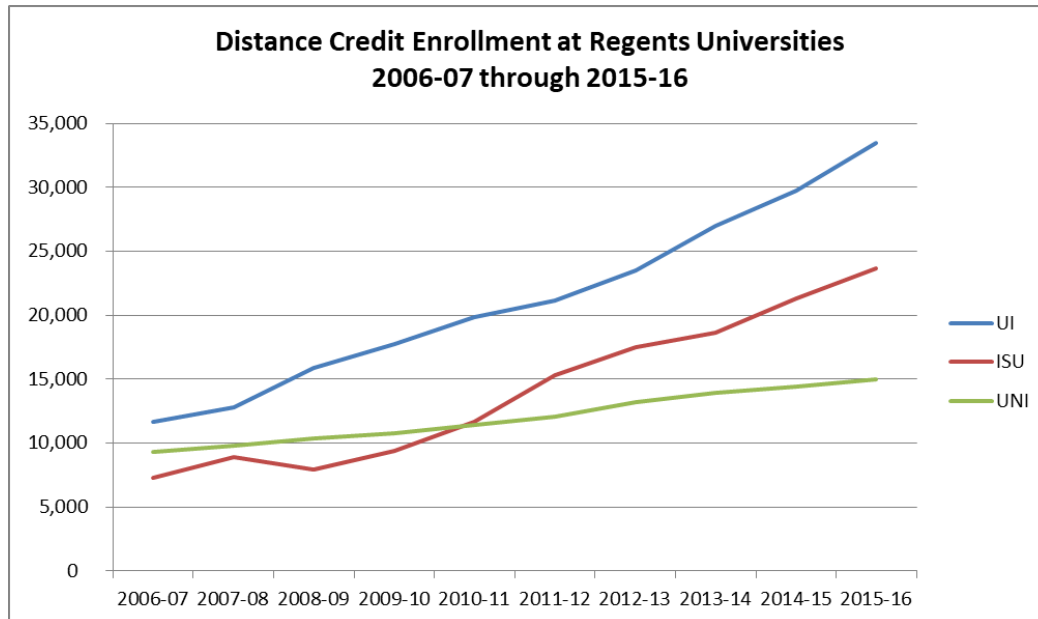
- Eastern Iowa Community College
- Iowa Lakes Community College
- North Iowa Area Community College
- Northwest Iowa Community College
- Southeastern Community College
- Southwestern Community College
- Western Iowa Tech Community College

DISTANCE EDUCATION ENROLLMENT AND OFFERINGS IN IOWA

Regents Universities:

Enrollment. The [2015-2016 Distance Education Report](#) presented to the Board of Regents in February 2017 shows total distance credit enrollments across the three State universities totaling 72,073, an increase of 10.2% compared to the previous year.³ The 2015-2016 report notes that distance enrollment came from all 99 counties and 743 communities. **Chart 6** compares distance enrollment by university over a 10-year period.

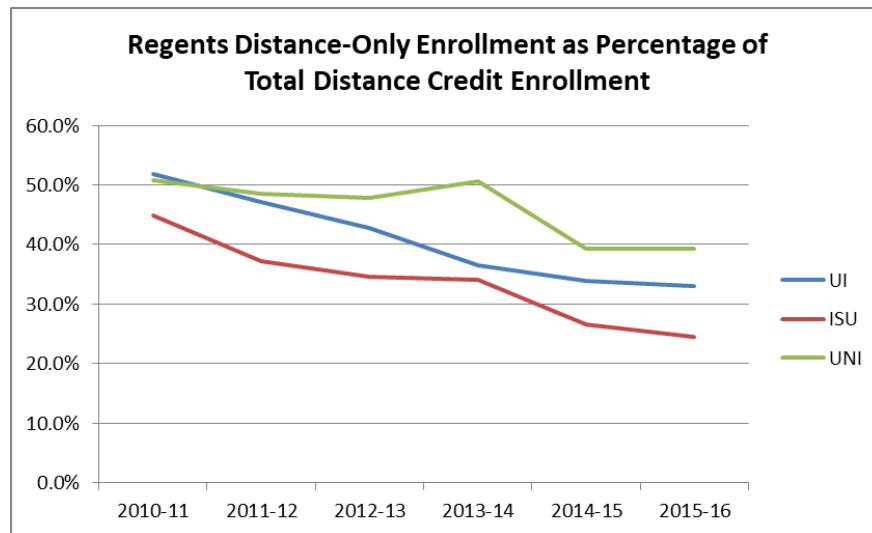
³ Board of Regents, Distance Education Reports, www.iowaregents.edu/reports (last visited November 21, 2017).

Chart 6

In 2015-2016, the number of unduplicated⁴ students enrolled only in distance courses was 5,559, with course enrollments totaling 9,976 and credit hours totaling 27,955. The number of unduplicated students enrolled in both on-campus and distance courses was 12,203, with course enrollments totaling 15,594 and credit hours totaling 37,055.

Of the total distance enrollment (17,762), 31.3% of students were enrolled only in distance courses. By comparison, in 2010-2011, the first year that such statistics were reported, 49.5% of distance education students were taking only distance courses. **Chart 7** shows distance-only credit enrollment as a percentage of total distance credit enrollment at the Regents universities.

⁴ Unduplicated enrollment is the actual number of individual students enrolled. Each student is counted only once, regardless of the number of courses or credits they are taking.

Chart 7

Programs and Courses. For 2015-2016, the State universities list 172 distance programs offering a certificate, Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science, Master of Business Administration, Ph.D., or other degree. By comparison, in 2006-2007, the total number of distance programs was 76.

At the University of Iowa (UI), distance course sections in 2015-2016 totaled 1,454, an increase of 11.9% compared to the previous year. Iowa State University (ISU) offered 974 distance course sections, an increase of 2.9% over the previous year. For the University of Northern Iowa (UNI), distance course sections totaled 948, an increase of 3.2% over the previous year.

Community Colleges:

Enrollment. The Department of Education reports⁵ that nearly 44.0% of all community college students were enrolled in at least one online course in the 2015-2016 academic year. Enrollment in distance education increased by 1.0% over the previous year, for a total of 60,425 students. Of those students, almost three-fourths (73.8%) were in college parallel programs, which are programs that prepare students to transfer to a four-year institution.

By comparison, in the 2007-2008 academic year, community colleges reported enrollment in distance courses of 36,776 students, with nearly two-thirds (61.6%) enrolled in college parallel programs.

Chart 8 compares distance enrollment at each of the community colleges in 2015-2016 and 2007-2008. The four colleges with the largest overall enrollment (Des Moines Area, Kirkwood, Eastern Iowa, and Iowa Western) are also the four with the largest distance enrollment and have experienced the greatest growth in distance enrollment.

⁵ Department of Education, Condition of Community Colleges Reports and Data Tables, www.educateiowa.gov/adult-career-and-community-college/publications (last visited November 21, 2017).

Chart 8

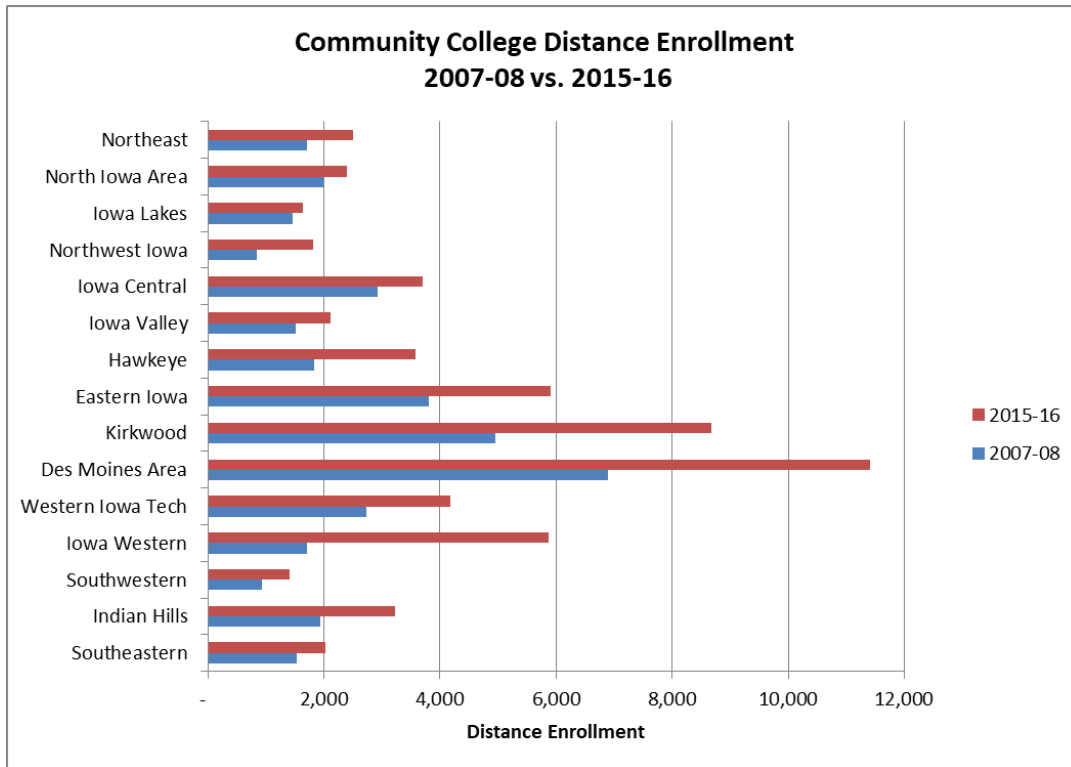
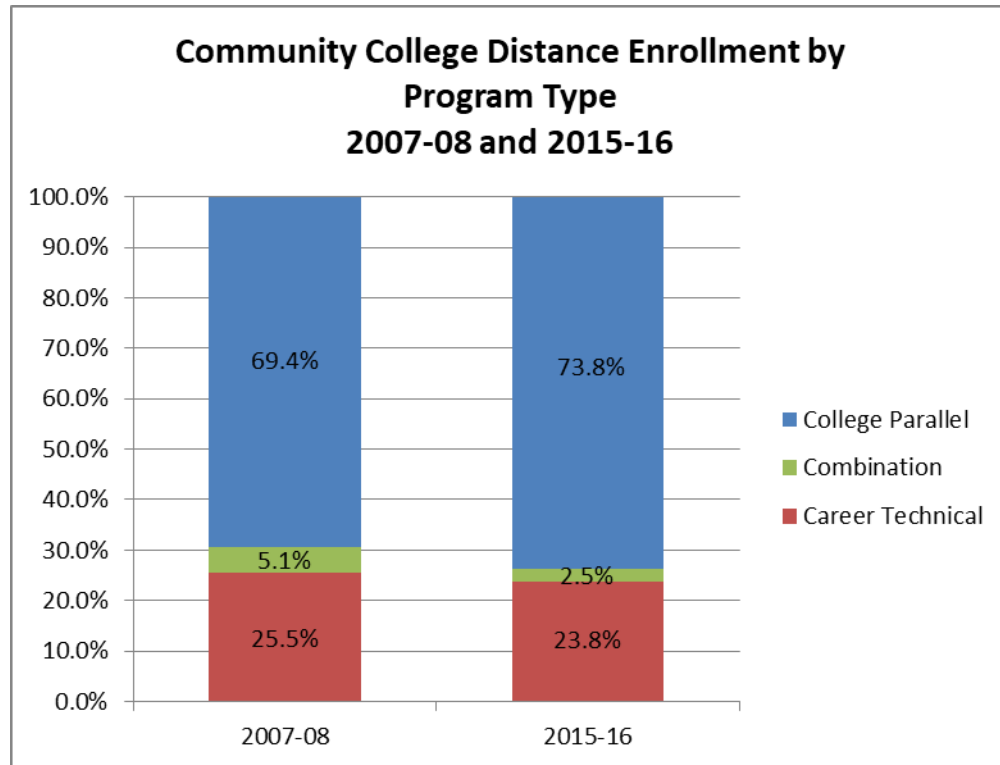


Chart 9 shows distance enrollment by program type for the same years. The share of distance enrollment in college parallel programs has increased, while the share in career and technical programs has decreased slightly.

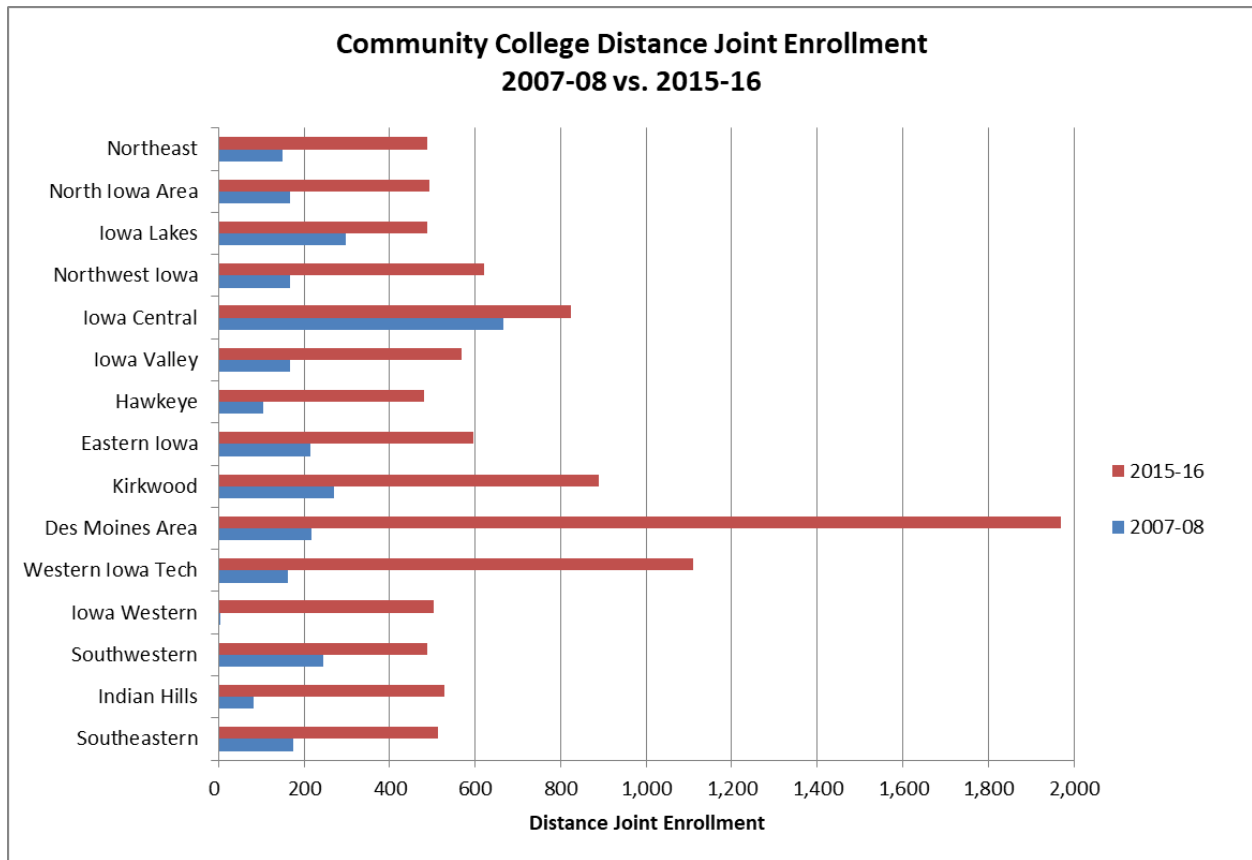
Chart 9



Joint Enrollment. For 2015-2016, the headcount enrollment of high school students in one or more distance education courses at the community colleges was 10,561, which was 22.4% of all jointly enrolled high school students. Those students took a total of 59,192 credit hours online, which was 15.6% of all joint enrollment credit hours.

By comparison, in 2007-2008, 3,093 high school students were enrolled in one or more distance education courses at the community colleges, which was 9.1% of all jointly enrolled high school students. Those students took a total of 13,658 credit hours online, which was 5.8% of all joint enrollment credit hours. **Chart 10** shows distance joint enrollment by college for 2015-2016 and 2007-2008.

Chart 10



COMPARING IOWA TO OTHER STATES

The following charts, based on data from the IPEDS for the 2015-2016 academic year, show Iowa’s rankings among the 50 states and the District of Columbia for distance education enrollment. Each chart shows Iowa’s ranking (in red) and the national median (in blue) for percentage of students enrolled exclusively and nonexclusively in distance courses.

Among public two-year institutions, Iowa’s community colleges rank at or above the national median. Iowa’s Regents universities rank below the national median in all categories except for graduate students exclusively enrolled in distance courses.

Chart 11

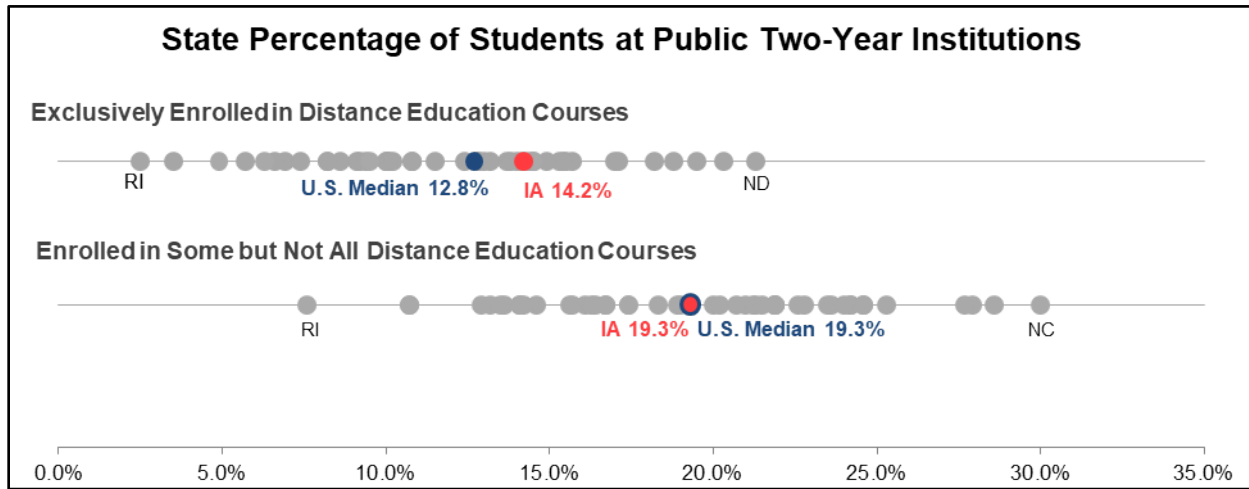


Chart 12

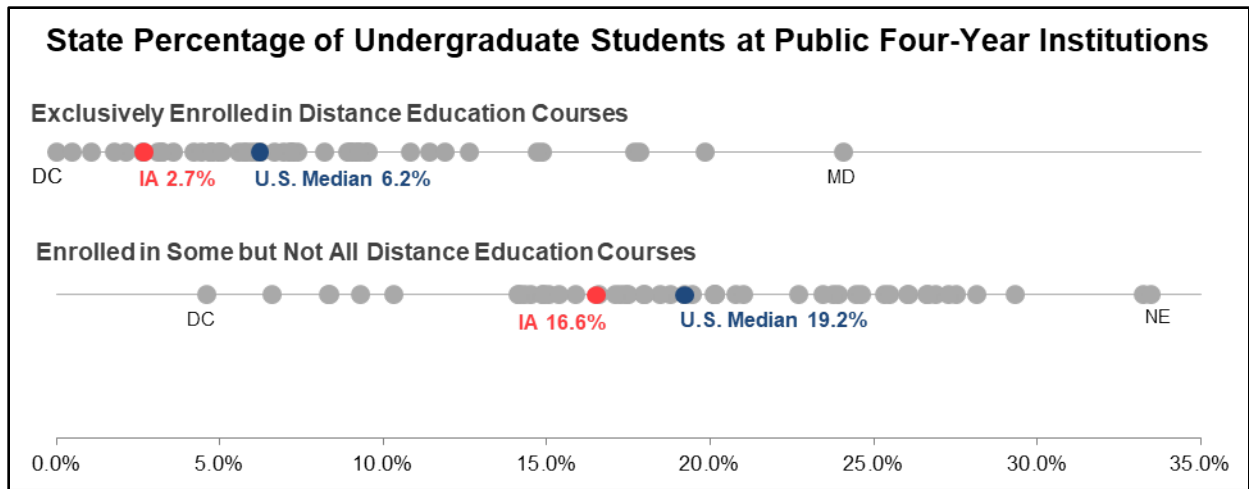
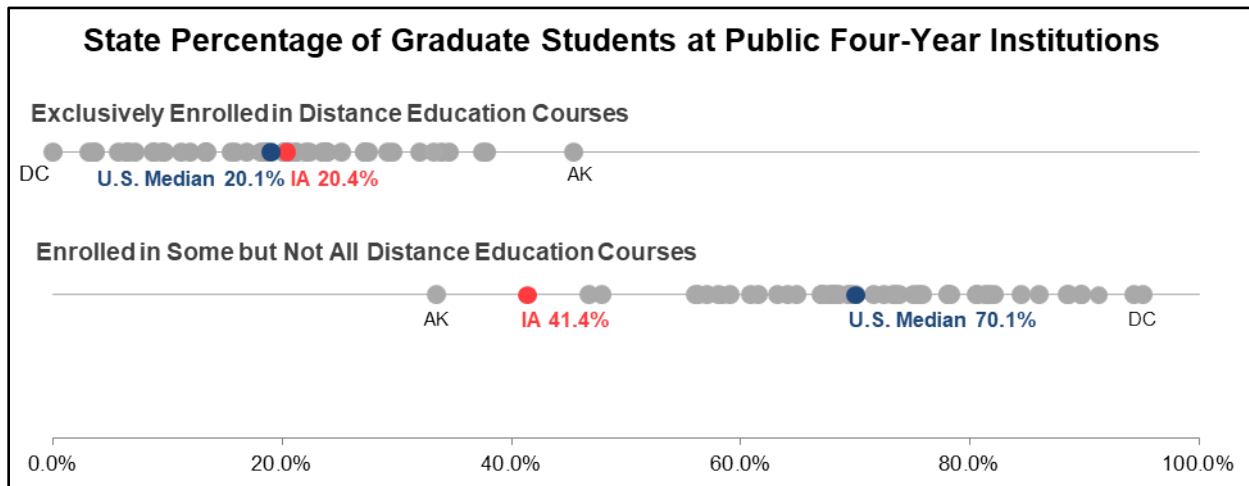


Chart 13



COSTS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION COMPARED TO ON-CAMPUS DELIVERY

Introduction. Detailed information about the cost of distance education compared to other delivery methods is not readily available. What is available varies by institution, due to variations in administrative structure and other factors, making it difficult to make comparisons. The following information is not comprehensive and is primarily anecdotal in nature.

Source of National Cost Information: The *Distance Education Price and Cost Report*, February 2017,⁶ prepared by the WICHE (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education) Cooperative for Educational Technologies (WCET), reports data from a survey of 197 individuals involved directly in offering postsecondary distance education in the U.S.; 79.7% of the respondents were from public institutions.

Sources of Iowa Cost Information: The Regents universities and the Department of Education (on behalf of the community colleges) were contacted for information. In addition, on the recommendation of the Department, administrators at Iowa Lakes, Northwest Iowa, Northeast Iowa, and Kirkwood community colleges were contacted to provide confirmation of the Department's perspective and additional anecdotal information for each of their colleges.

Price. Respondents to the WCET survey were asked whether the price charged to students for distance courses was directly dependent on the cost to produce and offer the courses. Nearly 90.0% of the respondents said that the price was not dependent on the cost.

This is also true in Iowa's public institutions, where the price charged to a student for a distance course is generally the same as for a comparable on-campus course. However, among the community colleges, six charge slightly more per credit hour for distance courses, while four charge less.

Cost. The Regents universities report that services such as digital library materials and resources, as well as information technology services, are available to all students, making the costs for those services equally applicable to on-campus and distance students. Much of the technical infrastructure needed for distance education is also used for on-campus and blended offerings. As a result, those costs are not solely applicable to distance education.

The Iowa Department of Education noted that any difference in costs between on-campus and distance courses at the community colleges is generally insignificant. The types of costs may differ, but the total costs for distance courses are not generally greater, as the colleges work to keep the costs of distance programs down. For instance, costs for course development may be greater for distance programs, but the costs to deliver those courses are frequently lower than for face-to-face delivery. Among the reasons for this is the use of adjunct faculty to teach distance courses; the reduced need for classroom and building space, as well as maintenance and utilities; and collaboration among the colleges to jointly develop or purchase commonly used resources, such as the Iowa Community College Online Consortium mentioned earlier.

The following information in regard to the cost to the institution to offer a distance course is presented using the four categories of cost identified by the WCET report:

- Preparing for the course
- Teaching the course
- Assessing student learning

⁶ Russell Powin and Terri Taylor Straut, *WCET Distance Education Price and Cost Report*, February 2017, wcet.wiche.edu/sites/default/files/Price-and-Cost-Report-2017_0.pdf (last visited November 21, 2017).

- Supporting students and faculty

Each of these sections will highlight results from the WCET report and responses from the Regents institutions. Where available, additional information from the community colleges will also be provided, as well.

Cost – Preparing for the Course. The WCET survey respondents clearly identified the cost of technology and software as the most significant difference between distance and on-campus courses. The costs of accreditation, state authorizations, admissions, and enrollment were identified as being the same (or less) for distance courses compared to on-campus courses by at least half of the respondents.

In Iowa, the State universities cite the fee to join the National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA) as a cost associated with preparing to offer distance education courses. The State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement (SARA) permits distance education providers in member states to register with their own states and gain access to students in other member states without paying additional state registration fees. The fee ranges between \$2,000 and \$6,000, based upon the institution's enrollment size. This is a cost associated only with providing distance education to out-of-state students; it is not necessary for the universities and community colleges to register to provide distance education to Iowa residents.

The University of Northern Iowa (UNI) also noted that in FY 2017, the university spent approximately \$25 on marketing and promotion of distance courses for each student enrolled exclusively in distance education. Because of the competitive environment and changing expectations of distance students, UNI predicts that additional investment in marketing and recruiting will be necessary to maintain current enrollment levels. UI and ISU did not specifically address this cost.

Cost – Teaching the Course. More than half of the WCET survey respondents found design of course specifications, instructional design, creation of learning materials, and assuring accessibility and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance to be costlier for distance education courses. A majority of respondents found the costs for obtaining existing learning materials, delivery of the course content, and facilitation of group activities for distance courses to cost the same or less than on-campus courses.

At Iowa's Regents institutions, the direct cost of instruction (i.e., faculty salaries) is generally the same for distance and on-campus offerings. Many faculty members teach courses in both formats. Professional development for faculty new to teaching in a distance format is an added cost. As mentioned earlier, some community colleges may rely more heavily on adjunct instructors for distance courses to reduce costs. But all of the colleges use at least some adjunct faculty, regardless of the method of delivery.

The University of Northern Iowa provided additional information regarding instructional development staff who support the Learning Management System (LMS) used to deliver distance education. The staff includes four instructional developers and one specialist support position, at a cost in FY 2017 of \$414,000. Iowa State University (ISU) cited FY 2017 costs of \$1.8 million for design and creation of learning materials. The University of Iowa (UI) noted the necessity of similar staff services but did not provide a cost estimate.

Cost – Assessing Student Learning. A majority of WCET survey respondents found administering and proctoring assessments and verifying student identity for assessments to be costlier for distance education courses. A large majority agreed that obtaining assessments and evaluating or grading assessments was the same for both distance and on-campus courses.

In Iowa, UNI's cost estimate in the previous section (Teaching the Course) includes the cost of instructional development staff time spent consulting with faculty to determine the best assessment solution. Many exclusively distance courses at UNI are graduate level and do not generally involve proctoring of exams. However, as undergraduate distance programs at UNI increase, more proctoring solutions will be needed. The university estimates this cost could be as high as \$2,000-\$3,000 per course.

Iowa State University cites the FY 2017 cost of an online testing center and the software needed to facilitate exam proctoring at \$350,000.

The University of Iowa does not specify a cost but describes testing centers that include identity verification systems and cameras, as well as proctoring solutions. UI also offers online course evaluations, but these are used across all methods of course delivery, so the cost is not specific to distance education.

Cost – Supporting Students and Faculty. A significant majority of WCET survey respondents indicated that costs in this category were the same for distance and on-campus courses, with the exception of the cost of faculty training. The report notes that this reflects a steep learning curve for faculty who have no previous experience teaching in a distance education format.

In Iowa, UNI reports that the Office of Continuing and Distance Education (CDE) is the point of contact for distance students and promotes best practices for faculty, as well as providing workshops on effective teaching strategies. For new course development, faculty members are paid a one-time development stipend of \$1,000 per credit hour, with stipulations requiring specific training and work with instructional development personnel. The one-time cost for development of new distance courses in FY 2017 was \$112,000. The cost of providing instructional development support to faculty in FY 2017 was \$465,000.

The UI response cites efforts to ensure readiness of students to participate in distance education. Advisors are prepared to address the specific needs and challenges of distance students, and distance students have access to some campus resources, such as the Writing Center. Instructional design staff provide support to faculty and are designing a faculty workshop in distance course development. In addition, dedicated technical staff monitor each virtual classroom.

At ISU, training is provided to faculty for teaching in a distance environment, at a cost in FY 2017 of \$463,000. Other costs related to support of students and faculty are included in the ISU cost estimate in the Teaching the Course section above.

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS AND CHALLENGES FACING DISTANCE EDUCATION

The *WCET Distance Education Price and Cost Report* summarizes respondents' suggestions for policymakers regarding distance education. Among those are:

- Provide a vision for the future of distance education and challenge higher education leaders to meet it.
- Focus on costs and ask institutions to explain how costs can be controlled, how costs are measured, and how costs impact the price paid by students.
- Provide institutions with incentives for controlling costs, such as the ability to reinvest the savings.

The Board of Regents' 2015-2016 Distance Education Report identifies several factors in distance education that will be challenging for all distance education providers in the years ahead. Changes in technology and web-based learning management systems will continue as

the popularity of distance education grows. More students who are place-bound are seeking distance education opportunities, and accessibility to distance education for students with hearing or visual impairments or other physical challenges is becoming more critical. Addressing those challenges and increasing demand is likely to lead to higher costs.

The following are a few specific additional considerations and challenges for the future.

Scaling and Centralization. Arizona State University's EdPlus Action Lab is currently finishing research into the costs and benefits of scaling digital learning to achieve economic and academic efficiencies.⁷ The principal investigator for the research, Managing Director Lou Pugliese, cites a centralized approach to offering distance education as a way to improve cost and efficiency.

Regents Institution: The University of Northern Iowa (UNI) uses a centralized structure to provide administrative support to distance education programs through the Office of Continuing and Distance Education (CDE). The CDE is self-supported and provides leadership and support for planning, development, promotion, and delivery of courses and programs that fall outside of a traditional on-campus, face-to-face model.

The University of Iowa (UI) also uses a centralized approach, with the Office of Distance and Online Education providing campus-wide support for the development and delivery of online courses. At Iowa State University (ISU), distance education is decentralized across the institutions' departments and programs.

The Regents universities continue to explore opportunities to achieve efficiencies through sharing and collaboration among the three institutions. During the 2016-2017 academic year, a course-sharing pilot project was conducted that identified a small number of courses at each university that would be of interest to students at the other two universities. The courses were publicized on each of the campuses prior to and during the registration periods for each semester. Students registered for the courses through the normal process at the university in which they were enrolled. Citing feedback from students and modest enrollments in the pilot project, the Council of Provosts from the three institutions concluded that each school's course offerings were sufficient to meet the needs of its students.

The Council cited one positive outcome of the pilot project: It required staff at all of the universities to work together to create an improved, more straightforward system for students who do wish to cross-enroll between universities.

Community Colleges: All four of the community colleges contacted reported having centralized staff to support course development and delivery. Two of the respondents belong to the Iowa Community College Online Consortium (ICCO), mentioned earlier, which offers the member community colleges the opportunity to not only share a platform and other resources, but to achieve efficiencies in faculty training and course development.

Broadband Internet Access. One potentially significant limitation to further growth and development of distance education in Iowa and elsewhere is access to high-speed broadband Internet in rural areas. Connect Iowa, a nonprofit organization working with the Iowa Economic Development Authority to ensure and improve broadband access in Iowa, noted in a recent [article](#) in the Cedar Rapids *Gazette* that 22.0% of Iowa residents in 2015 lacked access to broadband Internet at the speed recommended by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). [This map](#), published by Connect Iowa in June 2015, shows the percentage of

⁷Dian Schaffhauser, *Finding the ROI of Online Programs*, *Campus Technology* (July 19, 2017), campustechnology.com/articles/2017/07/19/finding-the-roi-of-online-programs.aspx (last viewed November 20, 2017).

households in each Iowa county that were served by broadband at the speed recommended by the FCC. According to the Connect Iowa [website](#), access to broadband at this speed in Iowa is improving each year.

Quality. While concerns about the quality of distance education continue nationally, the greatest concerns are focused primarily on for-profit institutions and nonprofit institutions that contract with for-profit entities to provide distance programming. None of Iowa's public institutions currently provides its distance education programming through contracts with for-profit entities.

SUMMARY

Nationally and in Iowa, distance education offerings and enrollments continue to grow in higher education, with nearly one-third of all college students in the U.S. taking at least one distance course in 2015. Public institutions enrolled nearly 70.0% of those students. For-profit institutions, the sector that first offered extensive distance programming, are now experiencing significant decreases in enrollment.

Across the nation, the largest schools, with enrollment of 15,000 or more, accounted for nearly half of all distance enrollment in 2015. These 235 large institutions represented just 5.0% of the 4,836 degree-granting institutions that were open to the public. In fact, only 47 of those institutions (1.0%) enrolled 23.0% of distance students, and 9 institutions (0.2%) enrolled more than 10.0% of distance students.

The Distance Education Enrollment Report 2017 notes that this concentration of distance enrollment means that a relative handful of institutions have an inordinate impact on distance education students overall.

In Iowa, distance enrollments in the Regents universities have grown steadily over the past decade, and enrollment in the latest year reported (2015-2016) increased more than 10.0% over the previous year. The percentage of distance students taking exclusively distance courses, however, decreased over the past decade. This reflects the change in attitude toward distance education, from a necessity for place-bound students to an opportunity for any student to find the courses and delivery methods desired.

The community colleges report even stronger growth, with distance education enrollment in the 2015-2016 academic year representing an increase of more than 64.0% over 2007-2008. And 22.4% of high school students that were jointly enrolled at the community colleges took at least one distance course.

While the one-time costs of offering distance courses tends to be more expensive than face-to-face delivery, the ongoing costs are often the same and, in some cases, lower. Some cost factors that may differ between distance education and traditional on-campus delivery include the cost of professional development for faculty who are new to teaching in a distance format, as well as training and technical support for faculty who develop new online courses. Distance learning presents several challenges in regard to assessment of learning that may increase costs, including online proctoring or proctored testing centers and the necessity of ensuring the identity of the student taking the assessment.

As distance offerings and enrollments continue to grow, there are challenges ahead but also opportunities for collaboration and efficiencies of scale.

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