

Distance Learning at a Closer Distance

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Introduction / Background

An increasing number of students are taking distance learning courses such as those designed by **K12** or **Laurel Springs** as a means of receiving academic credits without attending traditional brick and mortar schools. Our distance learning students include students pursuing a home school education and athletes whose training and competition schedules require fairly extreme flexibility. In addition, candidates for distance learning education often have medical, behavioral, and/or psychological concerns that prevent them from thriving in traditional schools. These students are often unequipped with executive functioning skills or the ability to self-teach, skills necessary for success in distance learning courses. *In our experience, we have found the lack of proximity between instructor and student, the overly flexible sequencing expectations of online courses, and the inability of online instructors to be flexible in the manner with which they teach make distance learning programs a challenge for many students who are otherwise excellent candidates for this type of instruction.*

Problems inherent in Distance Learning

Our team at **MLS** firmly believes in the importance of proximity as a precedent to quality instruction and organizational support. Proximate teaching of a student allows the instructor not only to instruct in a more engaging manner, but also to read subtle body language that indicates student level of understanding. The lack of proximity in distance learning programs between instructor and student is compounded when the student has difficulty sustaining focus but can appear to be on-task. This is the case for many students who fail to thrive in traditional classroom settings.

Generally, distance learning courses have a default pace with which the course is sequenced and firm due dates for assignments and tests are rarely in place. This arrangement poses a problem for students who have a tendency to procrastinate because accountability or pace-keeping is left up to the student. Considering the profile of students in need of distance learning education, this lack of structure may be a recipe for disaster and may reinforce “bad habits” which in some cases led to the students’ inability to thrive in traditional schools.

In our experience with various distance learning programs, we have found that the presentation course content is quite dry, especially as it pertains to humanities courses. Teaching literature should involve engaged discussion amongst teachers and other students. While most programs attempt to mimic this instruction model with discussion boards, they often fall short. Distance learning educators must stick to their curriculum. If a course is too easy or too challenging, the instructor can do little to fit the needs of the individual student.

How our Distance Learning Support Program can help

Our program at **MLS** aims to provide a medium between student and online instructor. We teach course material directly to students in an engaging manner, supplementing the content with our own materials. We work closely with students to ensure they are truly learning the material, not simply regurgitating content that is fed to them through online materials. We hold students accountable for due dates, work to shape positive behavior, and reinforce sound study and organization habits. Since we began our program, we have had great success helping students successfully complete online courses, many of whom then transition back to brick and mortar schools. Our program is flexible but structured, and we work in conjunction with families and health professionals to set attainable goals that allow students to experience success as well as build stronger study skills.

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