



Highlights of [GAO-04-78T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Select Education, Committee on Education and the Workforce, House of Representatives

## DISTANCE EDUCATION

# Challenges for Minority Serving Institutions and Implications for Federal Education Policy

### Why GAO Did This Study

The Higher Education Act of 1965 gives special recognition to some postsecondary schools—called Minority Serving Institutions—that serve a high percentage of minority students. These and other schools face stiff challenges in keeping pace with technology. One rapidly growing area, distance education, has commanded particular attention and an estimated 1.5 million students have enrolled in at least one distance education course.

In light of this, GAO was asked to provide information on: (1) the use of distance education by Minority Serving Institutions; (2) the challenges Minority Serving Institutions face in obtaining and using technology; (3) GAO’s preliminary finding on the role that accrediting agencies play in ensuring the quality of distance education; and (4) GAO’s preliminary findings on whether statutory requirements limit federal aid to students involved in distance education.

GAO is currently finalizing the results of its work on (1) the role of accrediting agencies in reviewing distance education programs and (2) federal student financial aid issues related to distance education.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-78T](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-78T).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Cornelia M. Ashby at (202) 512-8403, ashbyc@gao.gov.

### What GAO Found

There are some variations in the use of distance education at Minority Serving Institutions when compared to other schools. While it is difficult to generalize, Minority Serving Institutions offered at least one distance education course at the same rate as other schools. When Minority Serving Institutions offered distance education, they did so to improve access for students who live away from campus and provide convenience to older, working, or married students. Some Minority Serving Institutions do not offer distance education because classroom education best meets the needs of their students. Additionally, schools view the overall use of technology as a critical tool in educating their students and they generally indicated that offering more distance education was a lower priority than using technology to educate their classroom students. The two primary challenges in meeting technology goals cited by these institutions were limitations in funding and inadequate staffing to maintain and operate information technology.

**Selected Characteristics of Minority Serving Institutions**

Characteristics	Type of Institution		
	Historically Black Colleges and Universities	Hispanic Serving Institutions	Tribal Colleges
Number of schools <sup>a</sup>	102	334	29
<b>Percent of each type of institution</b>			
Public	50	45	100
Private nonprofit	50	23	0
Private for-profit	0	32	0
Average number of students per institution	2,685	5,141	467
Number of students served in 2000-01	274,000	1.7 million	13,500

Source: Department of Education and GAO analysis.

Accrediting agencies have taken steps to ensure the quality of distance education programs, such as developing supplemental guidelines for reviewing these programs. However, GAO found (1) no agreed upon set of standards for holding institutions accountable for student outcomes and (2) differences in how agencies review distance education programs. Finally, several statutory rules limit the amount of federal aid for distance education students. GAO estimates that at least 14 schools are not eligible or could lose their eligibility for federal student financial aid if their distance education programs continue to expand. While the number of schools potentially affected is relatively small in comparison to the more than 6,000 postsecondary institutions in the country, this is an important issue for the nearly 210,000 students who attend these schools. Several factors must be considered before deciding whether to eliminate or modify these rules. They include the cost of implementation, the extent to which the changes improve access, and the impact that changes would have on Education’s ability to prevent schools from fraudulent or abusive practices.