

Why GAO Did This Study

As the largest provider of financial aid in higher education, with about \$134 billion in Title IV funds provided to students in fiscal year 2010, the Department of Education (Education) has a considerable interest in distance education. Distance education—that is, offering courses by the Internet, video, or other forms outside the classroom—has been a growing force in postsecondary education and there are questions about quality and adequate oversight. GAO was asked to determine (1) the characteristics of distance education today, (2) the characteristics of students participating in distance education, (3) how the quality of distance education is being assessed, and (4) how Education monitors distance education in its stewardship of federal student aid funds. GAO reviewed federal laws and regulations, analyzed Education data and documents, and interviewed Education officials and industry experts. GAO also interviewed officials from accrediting and state agencies, as well as 20 schools—which were selected based on a variety of factors to represent diverse perspectives.

What GAO Recommends

To improve its oversight and monitoring of federal student aid funds, Education should develop a plan on how it could best use the new distance education data NCES is collecting and provide input to NCES on future data collections. Education agreed with the recommendation.

HIGHER EDUCATION

Use of New Data Could Help Improve Oversight of Distance Education

What GAO Found

While distance education can use a variety of technologies, it has grown most rapidly online with the use of the Internet. Online distance education is currently being offered in various ways to students living on campus, away from a campus, and across state lines. School offerings in online learning range from individual classes to complete degree programs. Courses and degree programs may be a mix of face-to-face and online instruction—“hybrid” or “blended” instruction. Online asynchronous instruction—whereby students participate on their own schedule—is most common because it provides students with more convenience and flexibility, according to school officials. In the 2009-2010 academic year, almost half of postsecondary schools offered distance education opportunities to their students. Public 2- and 4-year schools were most likely to offer distance education, followed closely by private for-profit 4-year schools.

Students in distance education enroll mostly in public schools, and they represent a diverse population. While they tend to be older and female, and have family and work obligations, they also include students of all races, current and former members of the military, and those with disabilities. According to the most current Education data (2007-2008), students enrolled in distance education studied a range of subjects, such as business and health.

Accrediting agencies and schools assess the academic quality of distance education in several ways, but accreditors reported some oversight challenges. Federal law and regulations do not require accrediting agencies to have separate standards for reviewing distance education. As such, accreditors GAO spoke with have not adopted separate review standards, although they differed in the practices they used to examine schools offering distance education. Officials at two accreditors GAO spoke with cited some challenges with assessing quality, including keeping pace with the number of new online programs. School officials GAO interviewed reported using a range of design principles and student performance assessments to hold distance education to the same standards as face-to-face education. Some schools reported using specialized staff to translate face-to-face courses to the online environment, as well as standards developed by distance education experts to design their distance education courses. Schools also reported collecting outcome data, including data on student learning, to improve their courses.

Education has increased its monitoring of distance education but lacks sufficient data to inform its oversight activities. In 2009, Education began selecting 27 schools for distance education monitoring based on an analysis of risk factors, but it did not have data to identify schools with high enrollments in distance education, which may have impeded its ability to accurately identify high-risk schools. Between 2011 and 2013, Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) will start collecting survey data on the extent to which schools offer distance education, as well as enrollment levels. However, the department’s Office of Federal Student Aid (FSA), responsible for monitoring Title IV compliance, was not involved in the process of deciding what distance education information would be collected; therefore, it did not provide input on what types of data could be helpful in oversight. Further, FSA officials said they do not yet have a plan on how they will use the new data in monitoring.