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## **Exclusive Interview with Darcy Hardy, PhD** **The Changing Scope of Distance Education**

'Distance education' is quickly becoming a misnomer, according to Dr. Darcy Hardy, who held a seminar with NASEMSO Board members and staff on the topic late last fall. CoAEMSP Executive Director Dr. George Hatch believes her insight and messages were critical enough to the future of EMS education that he recently arranged for a follow-up interview with Dr. Hardy.



*Darcy Hardy, PhD,  
Associate Vice President  
for Enterprise Consulting  
at Blackboard Inc.*

"The term 'distance education' doesn't really fit what we do today," Dr. Hardy stated. With the advent of sophisticated technological advances, 'online learning', Dr. Hardy explained, may be a more accurate term to use. Today, online learning provides *accessible* education "anytime, anyplace, anywhere." This exciting breakthrough means quality education is now accessible geographically, time-wise, and location-wise (such as home, office or classroom). Technology has played a huge role in changing the scope of online learning, and now employs a variety of learning tools including podcasts, audio conferences, video conferences, and chat rooms, along with traditional print materials.

### **State Authorization & Legal Implications**

The changing scope of online learning provides students with enhanced learning opportunities, and changes teaching philosophies. However, the most crucial issue EMS educators must be aware of is **state authorization and the legalities surrounding it**. When a Paramedic student from another state is enrolled in an institution's program, the institution is required to gain approval from that student's state. Students crossing the border from one state to another affects financial aid, student liability, and other issues. What makes it more complex is that requirements for approval vary from state to state. EMS educators need to make sure they understand the regulations governing online learning, and that their programs are not operating in a state without authorization.

The non-profit organization [WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies \(WCET\)](#) is an excellent resource that addresses these concerns, as well as integration of distance learning with educational technology, and state reciprocity. Dr. Hardy is particularly impressed with the blogs offered by WCET. This resource also addresses the state authorization reciprocity agreement ([SARA](#)), which helps protect distance-learning students as well as the interests of states and institutions.

These regulation challenges demand a national EMS policy, Dr. Hardy believes. When a Paramedic student from one state takes an exam in another state, it is not a regional, programmatic, or state issue, but one of liability that requires an EMS policy on a *national* level. **Online learning cannot be effectively managed nor can the competence of the EMS student be assured without such a policy**. Because the U.S. Department of Education develops policies and regulations for online education, the EMS community-particularly those who hold positions at the national level-need to keep apprised of the actions of the Department of Education as well.



## Opportunities Provided by Online Learning

37 million people in the U.S. possess some college credits but never received a post-secondary credential, Dr. Hardy shared. Another 36 million, she said, are below the literacy level-but a respectable number of those are **just barely below this point**. With literacy development, Dr. Hardy explained, this latter group has the potential to meet the requirements to further their education and become part of the job pool. Online learning can help students in these two categories make important career changes while still managing their other responsibilities at home and/or at their current job. Educators responsible for program development, oversight, and accreditation need to consider the potential that exists when students are provided "accessible delivery" 24/7.

Online education has changed the way students interact by helping to level the playing field in ways not possible in the traditional classroom, Dr. Hardy said. "There is no front row or back row" in an online classroom. The student who may have dominated the traditional classroom no longer has that advantage; and the introverted personality now has a voice. What's more, students have access to one another online in ways they previously didn't. Discussion boards, for example, bring students together, which allows them to help each other through the sharing of ideas, resources, and learning from one another.

## Changing Teaching Philosophies

Just a few short years ago, students were limited to physically gathering at one time in one place. Now educators agree that some learning, such as didactics, does not need to take place face-to-face. Medical terminology, for example, can be learned just as successfully outside of the classroom. Dr Hardy explained that educators are now categorizing topics in a course or curriculum, identifying the topics that need faculty engagement, and separating them from those that can be learned outside of the physical classroom.

## Accessing Quality Digital Content

Dr. Hardy encourages EMS educators to look to their peers for quality digital content. Seeking out a reputable publisher such as Pearson is important, for example, but Paramedic educators should find out what teaching resources are being used by other EMS educators, and whether or not they are satisfied. Presentation and packaging of online courses also need to be considered. Resources are available that offer standards and rubrics for courses, with many being free. Several include [Quality Matters](#), a member-based organization; [Blackboard](#) (the company with which Dr. Hardy is affiliated), and [Chico State University](#). All post similar standards on their websites that are available for anyone to access and use for building or licensing a course that will be acceptable in the field. These resources can easily be found by searching the internet (search "online course standards" or "online course rubrics").

EMS educators should also take advantage of open educational resources (OER), which offer free educational material that can be used as courses, books, reports and academic assignments. There are dozens of repositories available to the public for re-use and re-formatting at no charge. "OER offers so much content and rich resources to download and include in your course for free," Dr. Hardy emphasized. Two of these Dr. Hardy mentioned were [Merlot](#) and [OpenStax](#). "The first thing I'd be doing [as an educator] is going straight to OER for content," Dr. Hardy stressed.



Exciting changes are occurring in the scope of online learning-now a viable method of providing a first-rate and accessible higher education to students "anytime, anyplace, anywhere." Paramedic educators need to stay abreast of the changes taking place in online learning, the resources available, and the policies that affect their institution's liability and accreditation. Online learning today provides new opportunities for putting competent EMS providers in each of our communities.

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### **Valuable Online Learning Resources**

- [Trends and Issues \(PowerPoint\)](#)
  - [Best Practices](#)
  - [WCET Academic Integrity Checklist](#)
  - [WCET Talking Points: State and Federal Regulations on State Authorization of Distance Education](#)
  - [WCET Talking Points: State Authorization and Military Students](#)
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### **Top 4 Pointers for Online Learning**

#### **FOR PARAMEDIC EDUCATORS**

1. Be sure you understand the regulations governing online learning, and that your programs are not operating in a state without authorization.
2. Carefully consider the purpose and mission of your online program: it shouldn't only be about building up the numbers of students in an institution.
3. Online learning is not meant to be an electronic correspondence course or just a PowerPoint presentation.
4. Online learning is about providing access to students who may otherwise not be able to attend such a program-and developing successful EMS providers to communities across the country.

#### **FOR PARAMEDIC STUDENTS**

1. Be certain the institution you are considering attending is regionally or nationally accredited, and the Paramedic educational program is CAAHEP accredited.
2. Find out the success rate (the percentage of students who actually graduate) of students attending a school in which you are interested.
3. Find out the percentage of students at the institution who, upon graduation, successfully secured jobs in their area of studies.
4. Know the technological requirements: whether or not you need to be online at a certain time along with other students, or if courses are self-paced or facilitated.