Beyond Access: Student Perspectives on Support Service Needs in Distance Learning

Judith Potter, University of New Brunswick

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a study of the support service needs and assessments of distance learners at three Canadian bi-modal universities (i.e., offering degree-credit courses both on-campus and through distance education). A student profile is developed and compared with previous descriptions. From student data, a model of support services for distance learners emerges. Recommendations for the further development of support services for distance education students at Canadian bi-modal universities are also included.

RÉSUMÉ

Ce document décrit les besoins des services de soutien ainsi que les évaluations des apprenants à distance dans trois universités bimodales du Canada (i.e., offrant des cours avec crédits sur le campus et par l'intermédiaire de l'éducation à distance). Un profil d'étudiant est développé et comparé avec les descriptions antérieures. Un modèle des services de soutien pour les apprenants à distance se dégage des données estudiantines. Aussi comprises dans le document, sont des recommandations pour un développement plus poussé des services de soutien pour les apprenants à distance dans les universités bimodales du Canada.

Introduction

Pursuing higher education through distance formats offers a great deal of promise in Canada, a country of vast geography and a widely distributed population. The opportunity to learn away from a physical university campus—either at home or in a local community setting—can provide the flexibility required by adults who wish or need to continue their education but have multiple roles and responsibilities that do not allow full-time study or on-campus attendance. Distance education can also provide learning options for persons with reduced mobility such as those with physical disabilities or the prison population. In short, distance education opportunities have reduced or eliminated some of the situational and institutional barriers to adult learning.

For some time, the emphasis in distance education has been on preparing courses, and then on finding and implementing means of making them available off campus. In recent years, however, there has been evidence of increasing critical reflection on an approach that may have given technology prominence over the learner. Institutions and distance education authors are demonstrating greater concern with human questions relating, for example, to access and participation, learner characteristics, persistence and dropout rates, and factors that contribute to success and satisfaction for distance learners. Literature on support services for distance learners is limited, but growing; literature presenting the learner's perspective concerning support service needs is sparse indeed.

The term "student support services" is used in a variety of ways. For some authors, particularly in the distance education world, it has been limited to describing the learning resources needed by students to complete course requirements. In the context of this study, however, it has a much broader meaning as it includes the many forms of assistance that are intended to both remove barriers (situational, institutional, dispositional, and informational) and promote academic success. Examples of such support services are pre-admission counselling, academic advising, financial aid, learning skills instruction, child care, and much more.

The significance of student support services for on-campus clientele of all ages is well established. The provision of campus-based services for part-time students varies among Canadian universities, but not to as great an extent as do practices regarding services for distance education learners. Several factors indicate that student support is a vital issue in Canadian distance education and clearly worthy of further study. First, some

Canadian institutions report high noncompletion rates; Athabasca University, for example, claims course completion rates in the order of 25 percent, which is one-half to one-third of those reported for the Open University in which the student support network is much tighter (Bates, 1989). There is evidence to suggest that student support services can play a significant role in helping students to persist.

Second, it is reasonable to assume that adults studying by distance need various forms of assistance. Frequently, adults return to formal education as a result of a significant transition in their lives (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980). For many, this step brings serious adjustments for the individual and her/his family (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989); distance education students may face the overlay of having to deal with unfamiliar technology and of being alone in their learning enterprise. Student support services can and should assist distance learners to cope with the transitions that they experience.

Third, in Canada the majority of distance education students are women. Campus-based student service experience demonstrates that women are more likely to avail themselves of assistance when it is required. Some authors (e.g., Grace, 1991) believe that women may, in general, benefit from interaction in the learning context to a greater extent than do men and that this factor may put them at a disadvantage in most distance education contexts. Others (e.g., Bowman & Will, 1994) ask whether distance education has the capacity to exacerbate inequalities. Based on her doctoral work with women studying by distance, Susan May (1992) offers this observation:

> Given the potential for distance education to extend educational access, it is important that distance educators continue efforts to reduce and eliminate barriers that prevent and restrict women's participation in learning activities. This action will necessarily include the extension of increased learner support services and assistance, such as career counselling and study assistance. (p. 217)

Support services may, then, be extremely significant in removing social barriers for some women.

Fourth, there exists a growing body of theory and research linking particular factors—for example, approach to learning (Holmberg, 1990; Marton & Saljo, 1984); conception of learning (Saljo, 1984; Strang, 1987); orientation to learning (Gibbs, Morgan, & Taylor, 1984); self-perception (Gibson, 1990); academic and social integration (Sweet, 1986); control

(Garrison & Baynton, 1987); field independence (Gibson, 1990); institutional variables (Billings, 1988; Cookson, 1990; Rekkedal, 1982) —to success in higher and distance education. This work suggests a need for advising and other support services to help individuals choose wisely and to assist them in developing attitudes and practices associated with success.

Fifth, demographics for Canadian distance education university students indicate that these are primarily highly motivated, employed individuals with a relatively high level of education and income. In other words, many Canadians who could benefit from a university education through distance study are not availing themselves of the opportunities. Once again, this demographic picture contrasts with that presented by the Open University, which has been successful in attracting and retaining a much higher proportion of socially and educationally less-privileged clientele. Perhaps improved student support services can make higher education by distance learning more accessible in Canada.

Few examples exist of studies that investigate student support services from the perspective of distance learners. One Canadian example (Westfall, 1991) used a survey of distance students at Brandon University as a basis for developing a program of support services. Several reviewers of research on distance learners and learning have called for more studies from the learner's point of view. Jocelyn Calvert (1986), for example, points to the need for research into support services for distance learners in Canada, specifically concerning what students think they need, how much they use services, and how these needs and patterns differ from those of campus-based students. Dirr (1990), in his development of distance education policy considerations for the upcoming decade, provides a rationale for the need for further research about distance education learners. Morgan (1991) reviews five key areas of research about student learning through distance education and emphasizes the importance of getting the learner's perspective. Anthony Bates, a distance educator with extensive experience in Britain and Canada, recommends that we in Canada listen more closely to the voices of our students, particularly in the area of support services (1989).

Distance education is of growing importance on the Canadian higher education scene, and we can only expect that its continued expansion. Distance education, however, presents challenges to learners above and beyond those faced by campus-based students. As it is the goal of student support services to reduce barriers and facilitate academic endeavours, it is

reasonable to assume that support services are an important issue in distance education and worthy of study.

Method

The University of Victoria, the University of Manitoba, and Memorial University of Newfoundland were selected for the study using the following criteria:

- Canadian;
- bi-modal: both on-campus and distance degree-credit teaching;
- geographical: one university from each major region—west, central, east;
- size: medium-sized institutions (10,000 to 15,000 students);
- willingness to participate and to assist with sampling.

Primary data sources for the study included: 1) review of literature that was then used to create an initial theoretical framework for support services for distance learners; 2) interviews with institutional representatives knowledgeable about distance education policies and practices; 3) review of institutional documentation, for example, reports, calendars; 4) questionnaire responses from 224 students (return rate of approximately 40 percent) who were enrolled in credit course(s) through distance study at one of the three institutions during 1992–93 and were residents of Canada; 5) follow-up telephone interviews with 15 students (11 women and 4 men) who indicated on a sheet included with (but separate from) the questionnaire that they would like to provide greater detail concerning their distance education experiences and their perspectives on student support services. These students represented the three institutions and were enrolled in credit course(s) by distance in 1992–93, as well as in at least one previous year.

The seven page questionnaire probed issues related to student support services, for example, importance, accessibility, stages at which particular services are needed, recommendations for improvements, as well as collecting background demographic information. Data from students were used to test and adjust the model of support services for distance learners created from the literature review. Interview data were used largely to add a human face to the questionnaire findings and are not reported here in depth. Unless stated otherwise, findings discussed below are based on questionnaire data.

FINDINGS

Profile of Distance Education Students
at Three Canadian Universities

Primary findings related to the profile of participating students (224 in number) indicated that about four out of five were women, with three-quarters aged 25 to 50. Older students (25 and above) primarily studied on a part-time basis, while the younger ones were largely full-time students. Distance students in this study were generally married with children and employed; younger respondents, however, tended to be unmarried and childless. Approximately 6 in 10 of employed respondents worked on a full-time basis, largely in the fields of health and education. Almost two-thirds of the study's participants lived at least 50 km from a university, with about 44 percent residing more than 200 km from a campus. Those living closer to a campus tended to focus on the flexibility and convenience of distance study as reasons for choosing this mode, whereas the geographically more distant students claimed to choose distance education because it was their only option. Almost 40 percent of respondents had completed a university or community college program before entering their current program; in contrast, only about one in seven participants entered with a high school completion or a GED without further education. More than 70 percent of respondents were taking courses for career-related reasons. Just over half of those who had experienced both on-campus and distance study indicated that they preferred traditional (i.e., on-campus, classroom-based) approaches, with the remainder preferring distance education formats.

Needs and Assessments

Importance of services.

Table 1 identifies the mean response selected by students completing the questionnaire when asked to rate the importance to distance learners of 24 possible support services (1= very to 4= none).

Respondents indicated that the most important services (those with a mean rating of under 2.0) are the ones required to get students through the early steps. Thus, provision of information and advice about distance learning opportunities and orientation to resources and learning formats were rated as most important. In addition, they rated communication with the course instructor as very important.

Services that received a mean rating of between 2.0 and 2.5 are largely

those required while studying—learning centre, communication with other learners, assistance with academic skills, tutoring, and dealing with the impact of distance study on self.

Services seen as least important, (those with a mean rating of 2.5 or above) primarily relate to others, for example, family, friends, and employers. The exceptions, that is, the personal services in this group, are introspective in nature—help with self-confidence and personal counselling.

Other important services added by respondents included flexibility (with time extensions, practicum arrangements, time for course completion), information about specific courses, orientation to faculty and administrative structure, help with exam preparation skills, and referral to local resources.

When asked their views on the most important services that universities could and should provide to distance students, interviewees highlighted two issues. More than half emphasized the need for high-quality materials designed specifically for distance and sent out in time for the beginning of the course. An equal number talked about the importance of access to the instructor, largely for feedback and encouragement. Next in significance were streamlined administrative procedures, such as timely and accurate information, registration systems that work, returning calls promptly, and "one-stop shopping."

Accessibility of services.

Table 2 identifies the mean response selected by students completing the questionnaire when asked to rate the accessibility to distance learners of 24 possible support services (1= very to 4= none). In this case, only 2 services scored a mean rating of under 2.0—the provision of information about ordering textbooks and general information about distance learning opportunities. Only 6 services received a mean accessibility rating of between 2.0 and 2.5, and all related to starting-out activities that respondents had rated as most important in Table 1. Almost half of the services (11 of 24) received an accessibility rating of 3.0 or greater on a scale where 4.0= no accessibility.

Table 2 also identifies the gap between the importance rating and the accessibility rating for each service listed. Clearly, from the respondents' point of view, the importance of services was not matched by their accessibility; the mean difference in the two ratings for each service is .67 on a 4-point scale. Services selected by respondents as being most important in

Table 1.

Importance of support services for distance education students

Type of assistance	N	Mean response
• Info about specific programs	220	1.31
• General info about distance ed opportunities	222	1.34
• Communication with course instructor	222	1.45
• Info about getting textbooks	220	1.56
• Advice re course selection	223	1.65
• Orientation to library / learning resources	222	1.86
• Orientation to media / course delivery format	221	1.90
• Help with application process	221	1.96
• Local learning centre for distance learners	219	2.07
• Communication with other distance learners	223	2.17
• Info about appropriateness for student of specific delivery formats	213	2.22
• Tutoring assistance with course content	223	2.17
• Career exploration	220	2.20
• Financial assistance	221	2.26
• Help with writing process	221	2.29
• Local university representative	218	2.30
• Help with learning skills	221	2.30
• Help with understanding potential effects of distance study on self	220	2.46
• Help with understanding potential effects of distance study on family	220	2.60
• Help with self-confidence	221	2.61
• Personal counselling	223	2.64
• Help with understanding potential effects of distance study on employer	220	2.66
• Help with understanding potential effects of distance study on friends	220	2.83
• Family counselling	220	3.13

Table 1 are marked by an * in Table 2; the mean difference in the importance and accessibility ratings for these services is .58. Those shown as next in importance in Table 1 are indicated by a ** in Table 2; the mean difference in the two ratings for these services is .75.

Assistance required at particular educational stages.

Table 3 illustrates another way of looking at support service needs, by noting respondents' views regarding the need for specific support services at particular stages in the academic life of a distance student. This table shows, for each of three phases of academic study—before starting; starting a course/program; and moving through a program—services selected as important by more than two-thirds of respondents, followed by those selected by between one-half and two-thirds of respondents.

For someone at the *pre-enrolment* stage, respondents viewed the provision of information and guidance as most significant. Other important services related to the appropriateness and impact of distance study as well as the provision of information about getting texts and using the particular delivery format. At the *starting out* stage, respondents attached primary importance to communication with the instructor and orientation to the media/delivery format as well as to learning resources. Other important services included those related to academic skills and resources. Respondents listed fewer critical services for individuals *moving through* their program, but they did stress the need for communication—both with the instructor and among learners—as well as for some academic supports.

Factors assisting students.

When asked in an open-ended question what had most helped them in their distance education learning, respondents offered comments that could be clustered into five categories: personal issues; employment issues; course design issues; communication issues; and other factors.

Overall the largest number of factors identified by respondents as helping them to be successful fit into the course design category. Forty-two individuals spoke of the importance of well-designed course materials that provide clear guidance as to expectations, course objectives, timelines, etc. The value of teleconferences as an aid to learning and communication was mentioned by 28 respondents. As well, 19 commented on the significance of providing a variety of types of learning assistance, for example, audio and video, in addition to print.

Personal factors rated second in frequency of mention. The significance of self- motivation and commitment was identified by 36 respondents as

Table 2.

Accessibility of support services for distance education students

Type of assistance	N	Mean response (accessibility)	Gap between imp. & acc.
• Info about getting textbooks*	219	1.86	.30
• General info about distance ed opportunities*	221	1.87	.53
• Info about specific programs*	220	2.02	.71
• Communication with course instructor*	220	2.06	.61
• Orientation to media / course delivery format*	217	2.44	.54
• Help with application process*	219	2.46	.50
• Advice re course selection*	221	2.46	.81
• Orientation to library / learning resources*	220	2.49	.63
• Communication with other distance learners**	220	2.55	.38
• Local university representative**	215	2.83	.53
• Info about appropriateness for student of specific delivery formats**	209	2.85	.63
• Local learning centre for distance learners**	218	2.93	.86
• Help with writing process**	215	2.94	.65
• Help with learning skills**	215	3.00	.70
• Tutoring assistance with course content**	215	3.11	.94
• Financial assistance**	216	3.15	.89
• Career exploration**	214	3.20	1.00
• Personal counselling	215	3.23	.59
• Help with self-confidence	215	3.27	.66
• Help with understanding potential effects of distance study on self**	215	3.35	.89
• Help with understanding potential effects of distance study on family	215	3.47	.87
• Help with understanding potential effects of distance study on employer	215	3.51	.85
• Family counselling	212	3.52	.39
• Help with understanding potential effects of distance study on friends	215	3.52	.69

* indicates services showing an importance rating of under 2.0 in Table 1
** indicates services showing an importance rating of 2.0–2.5 in Table 1

Table 3.
Respondents' needs at specific educational stages

Stage	% of respondents	Service
Pre-enrolment	67–100%	• General info about distance education opportunities • Help with application process • Info about specific programs • Advice re course selection
	50–66%	• Info about appropriateness of specific distance ed formats • Info about getting textbooks • Help with understanding potential effects of distance study on self • Local university representative • Help with understanding potential effects of distance study on family • Orientation to media/course delivery format
Starting courses/program	67–100%	• Communication with course instructor • Orientation to media/course delivery format • Orientation to library/learning resources
	50–66%	• Info about getting textbooks • Local learning centre for distance learners • Communication with other distance learners • Help with learning skills • Tutoring assistance with course content
Moving through program	67–100%	• Communication with course instructor • Tutoring assistance with course content • Communication with other distance learners
	50–66%	• Help with writing process

vital to their success in distance study. The flexibility and convenience of distance study which permits students to meet family and employment commitments, were noted by 32 respondents. Twenty-four individuals commented that the support of family and friends kept them going.

Communication factors also rated highly with respondents as helping them in learning by distance. The importance of communication with other learners was cited by 42 respondents, and the significance of communication with instructors received mention by 40.

Among "other" factors, assistance received from university personnel was identified as vital by twenty-five respondents. Learning support factors were highlighted by many; among these issues, assistance in accessing learning resources was seen as most important (identified by 22). Interestingly, employment-related factors were not mentioned with nearly as much frequency as those in the other categories.

Among the interviewed students, the factor mentioned most frequently as helping them was the support of family and friends. One-third of interviewees indicated that the flexibility of distance study had helped them a great deal. Two individuals mentioned circumstances in which continuing education personnel had made special arrangements to accommodate their needs. One student required a course that had not yet been prepared for distance study; the department arranged to tape the on-campus version and the instructor agreed to assist the student as required. In another situation, a student taking a teleconferenced course became hospitalized, and the department arranged to set up a teleconference unit in her room so that she could continue in the course. Less-frequently mentioned factors (2 out of 15) were employer support, human touch of individuals in the continuing education unit, personal sense of commitment, and the willingness of instructors to help. The provision of learning resources received a single mention.

Factors hindering students.

Likewise, respondents identified a number of factors in an open-ended question as hindering their academic progress through distance study. These can also be clustered into five categories: personal issues; employment issues; course design issues; communication issues; and other factors.

In responding to the barriers/hindrances question, respondents most frequently mentioned communication and personal issues. Difficulties in communicating with instructors were identified by 50 individuals, whereas a sense of isolation from other learners received 32 comments. The most

commonly mentioned personal issue was time pressure resulting from multiple responsibilities which received 36 mentions. Finances were clearly a factor for many; 30 respondents commented on difficulties in financing their studies. As well, 21 cited challenges in maintaining consistent self-motivation.

Problems with course design and implementation were next in importance as hindrances to success in distance study. Poor course materials, for example, out-of-date or unclear expectations and guidelines, were identified as a factor by 29 respondents. Twenty-one individuals commented on the impact of a lack of high quality and timely feedback on assignments.

Under "other" factors, the issue of limited course availability was emphasized by 29 respondents. A further 17 mentioned being hampered by difficulties in accessing learning resources, and 16 noted their university's disinterest in helping them to resolve a variety of concerns.

Barriers identified by interviewed students were highly diverse. The most common grouping (4 students) related to personal circumstances (work schedules, too tired to study). Three students mentioned difficulties with accessing required courses by distance, and 2 each referred to lack of feedback in courses, lack of personal contact with the institution, and lack of opportunity to share ideas with others as hindrances. Seven other factors were commented upon: late materials; unresponsive instructor; personal feelings of inadequacy; lack of access to a library; poor curriculum design (i.e., adapting classroom format for distance); lack of response from the institution; and lack of self-discipline.

Recommended changes.

Recommendations made by respondents in an open-ended question regarding support services for distance learners have been clustered into eight categories: on-site possibilities; improved communications; registration/admission services; academic services; institutional pathways; financial assistance; course selection/availability; academic advising counselling services.

Course availability received the largest number of comments. Although not formally a support service, this issue was clearly significant to respondents. Respondents wanted the opportunity to complete their program and offered a variety of suggestions for a greater range of distance courses and programs to be made available year-round.

Recommendations focusing on academic issues were next in abundance.

In particular, respondents wanted timely and constructive feedback on assignments and tests. Assistance with writing and study skills development was suggested, and several individuals commented on the need for tutoring services geared to the distance learner.

Improving communication with instructors and other students received a good deal of attention by respondents. Regular contact, whether by telephone, computer, teleconferences, or face-to-face, was clearly a priority. Respondents also suggested that their institution provide comprehensive information about available support services to distance students.

Respondents also had much to say about ways in which their institution could smooth the way for them. Primary among these suggestions were the issues of improved access to library resources and the need for a toll-free connection to the university (and, in the case of the University of Manitoba, from outside of the province). The provision of timely and accurate information and of clear procedures for problem solving were significant to these distance learners.

Access to academic advising and career guidance was important to respondents, as was help with financial concerns. With respect to admissions and registration, respondents stressed the need for accurate information and clear procedures. They also wanted to know how to access help when they ran into problems with registration.

Respondents indicated that a local resource person could provide a variety of types of assistance and that a local learning centre might house teaching and communications technology.

Discussion and Conclusions

Student Profile

This study has provided a composite profile of distance learners at three geographically distinct Canadian institutions. It not only shows some interesting similarities and differences from previous summaries but also adds considerably to our understanding of who are our Canadian distance education students. Participants in the study were primarily women; the proportion of women responding to the questionnaire (81.2 percent) was consistent with their overall participation rate at the University of Victoria, the only institution of the three that provided a breakdown of its distance students by gender. This finding is in agreement with Westfall's (1991) analysis of distance learners at Brandon University but not with Knapper

and Waslycia-Coe's (1982) report of correspondence students at the University of Waterloo.

Although age ranges reported in Canadian studies vary somewhat, it is fair to say that the current findings fit with the overall picture of distance learners as adults—one-half of respondents were in the 35–50 bracket and three-quarters were aged 25–50. This study has added the analysis, however, that shows that the older students (25 and above) primarily studied on a part-time basis, whereas the younger group largely consisted of full-time students. This study also documented the low participation rate of those over the age of 50.

Consistent with the findings of Caron (1982) from Téléuniversité as well as those of Westfall (1991) and Knapper and Waslycia-Coe(1982), distance students in this study were largely married with children and employed. Patterns in this study, however, indicate that those in the younger group, much like traditional on-campus learners, were unmarried and did not have children. The current study has also added a finer analysis of employment status; approximately 6 in 10 of employed respondents worked on a full-time basis, largely in the fields of health and education.

Some differences exist for this study group regarding distance from a university campus. While Keegan (1986) claims that 50–70 percent of enrolments in distance education programs in Canada and Australia are urban, almost two-thirds of the participants in this study lived at least 50 km from a university, with about 44 percent residing more than 200 km from a campus. Those living closer to campus tended to focus on the flexibility and convenience of distance study as reasons for choosing this mode, whereas the geographically more distant students claimed to choose distance education because it was their only option.

This study reinforces the perception that university distance education in Canada is largely reaching the already-educated (Devereaux, 1985; Paul, 1989). Consistent with Knapper and Waslycia-Coe's (1982) findings, the current study shows that almost 40 percent of respondents had completed a university or community college program before entering their current program. Overall, only about one in seven participants entered with a high school completion or a GED without further education, although the proportion was much higher for the University of Manitoba (almost 30 percent).

Programs of study were, of course, largely dictated by what the universities offered, but the majority of participants in this study were

enrolled in undergraduate programs in arts, education, and nursing; a very large majority indicated an intention to complete their program. Consistent with the findings of other studies of adult learners (e.g., Aslanian & Brickell, 1980; Potter & Alderman, 1992), these students were concerned about their careers; more than 70 percent of respondents stated that they were taking courses for career-related reasons. In light of these results, perhaps the low participation rate of individuals over 50 is not surprising. On the other hand, Canadian universities may be doing a poor job of promoting an understanding of higher education as personal development.

Slightly over half of the distance learners surveyed had experienced both distance and traditional (i.e., on-campus) modes of study. Distance formats included primarily print-based programs, some with audio and/or video components for content delivery and some with teleconferenced sessions. Just over half of those who had experienced both on-campus and distance study stated that they preferred traditional approaches. Interviews, however, suggested that the practicalities of family, job, etc., frequently dictated studying by distance and that these students were extremely grateful for the opportunity.

Key Services for Students

Students in this study placed the greatest importance on services related to:

- getting started in distance study, for example, information about distance learning opportunities (both general and specific), help with the application process, information about getting textbooks, guidance in choosing courses, orientation to accessing learning resources, information about the appropriateness of specific delivery formats for different types of learners, orientation to the particular course delivery format being used, financial assistance, and local university representative;

- communication, that is, with the instructor and other distance learners;

- academic success, for example, local learning centre, and assistance with writing skills and learning skills;

- personal assistance, for example, career exploration, and help with understanding the potential effects of distance study on self.

Services given a lower priority related to others (family, employer) and to personal introspection (self-confidence, personal counselling).

In essence, students seemed to be asking universities to provide the information they require, streamline processes and procedures, help reduce

their sense of isolation, and give them the academic tools they need to succeed. These findings are consistent with those reported by Westfall (1991) and Dillon, Gunawardena, and Parker (1992) as a result of student surveys, although students in the current study seem to have shown less concern with counselling issues.

Student Satisfaction

In general, students in this study assessed the availability of services as not matching their importance. They judged that universities were quite good about providing general information about distance education opportunities and ordering textbooks, and moderately good in providing some starting-out assistance, for example, information about programs, help with application and course selection, orientation to course delivery format and accessing learning resources, as well as in ensuring communication with the instructor. For the remaining services, students judged accessibility to be poor to non-existent.

Model for Student Support Services for Distance Learners

For distance learners, continuing their education requires the linking of two worlds, that is, their personal sphere with that of the institution. Although the same might be said of any educational experience for any learner, the need for integration is emphasized by the personal characteristics of these particular learners (adults with home, family, employment, and community responsibilities) and by the lack (for the majority of these distance students) of the institution's physical presence in their everyday lives. Distance students interviewed in this study provided an inside-out view of individuals trying to integrate both worlds—the personal and the institutional—and to manage the responsibilities required of both. The results of this study suggest the model of student support services for distance learners shown in Table 4.

Not all of the services indicated are required by all students. But because of individual differences among adult learners, something insignificant to one may be of crucial importance to another—and may make a pivotal difference. Therefore, in considering support service needs, institutions cannot simply plan for the majority.

Conclusions

The concluding model of support services presented in Table 4 not only represents the views of participants included in this study but also relates to the work of a large number of adult and distance educators, as well as individuals interested in issues related to student recruitment and retention

in higher education. It is consistent with emerging thinking in distance learning (e.g., see Holmberg, 1995) and provides a guide for the individualized type of thinking required to humanize what many describe as an industrialized form of education (Peters, 1983; Stewart, 1992;). In addition, it contributes breadth and depth to Garrison and Shale's (1990) notions about support and communication as components in distance learning by adding more about the "what" and the "who."

This study adds to the work already done on support services for distance learners. Addressing Thompson's (1989) concerns, it has systematically probed the issue of what services are needed and by whom. The study attempted to answer the kinds of questions raised by Calvert (1986) about support services for distance learners in Canadian bi-modal universities, and it extends Westfall's (1991) work focusing on Brandon University. From the perspective of adult learners, this model for support services for distance students can be adapted for use in other locations, keeping in mind Stewart's (1992) guidance that support services for distance learners must be shaped within the frame of reference of a large number of sometimes differing needs and that they are dependent on both the educational ethos of the institution and on factors such as student dispersion, resources, curriculum, and delivery system.

Recommendations

The following general recommendations are directed to Canadian dual-mode universities for their consideration and action.

Institutional studies.

Institutions need to conduct periodic and regular studies of their distance learners to determine: who are they and what are their needs? Breakdowns of the student population, for example, by gender, age, location, program, status, and number of courses taken each year, as well as detailed information regarding personal and professional circumstances, can contribute substantially to understanding this clientele.

Participation in distance education.

If institutions are concerned about student success in distance education and in making post-secondary education more accessible, attention must be paid to support services that help reduce situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers. Services that may counteract situational barriers include convenient access to textbooks and other learning resources, as well

as assistance with logistics and solving problems arising from the distance between the student and the institution. Services that may help to reduce institutional barriers include well-designed courses and effective and timely feedback processes. Dispositional barriers may be diminished by good personal counselling and academic advising services, for example, as well as by assistance with learning and writing skills.

Support services.

Taking into account the distance education philosophy, objectives and methodologies of the institution, as well as the characteristics of its distance education client base, institutions need to plan in a strategic way the support services offered to distance learners. Table 4 provides a grounded framework from which to work. The communication of the availability of support services to distance students is also a challenge; special attention must be paid to devising ways of informing students about services and service providers.

Training for course developers/instructors.

It is essential that distance-course developers and instructors are well prepared for the special challenges presented by distance teaching and learning. The use of multimedia approaches promoting communication and interest has been strongly supported by this study, as is the need for continual review of delivery methods and materials. In addition, the need to ensure that students receive clear information about course requirements and expectations as well as timely and helpful feedback has been stated in many different ways.

Coordination of services.

Based on the findings of this study, it appears that a centralized approach to student support services for distance learners may be more effective. Mandating a single unit with the responsibility of coordinating services may reduce complaints about unresponsive individuals or the tendency to "pass the buck."

Provision of courses.

Although not strictly a support service, the loud and clear request from students for more courses and programs to be offered through distance education voiced in this study is very difficult to ignore. Newly developed courses should use technologies that encourage interaction.

The field of distance education is changing quickly as technological development makes possible new formats for learning by distance. As such, some of the details of this study may already be outdated as, for example,

Table 4.
Distance learners' perspective on support service needs

Personal Issues	Institutional Issues	
	Communication/information issues	**Learning issues**
Pre-enrolment • How distance study might affect self, family • Finances	• Info about distance opportunities • Info about courses/programs • Help with application process • Advice re course selection	• Prior learning assessment • Appropriateness of distance formats • Orientation to media/delivery format
Starting courses/program • Counselling when required	• Communication with instructor • Communication with other learners • Info about getting textbooks • Academic advising • Help with logistics/problem solving	• Orientation to learning resources • Learning skills assistance • Local learning centre • Tutoring assistance • Well-designed courses • Effective and timely feedback
Moving through program • Counselling when required	• Communication with instructor • Communication with other learners • Academic advising • Help with logistics/problem solving	• Tutoring assistance • Writing skills assistance • Well-designed courses • Effective and timely feedback • Accessing learning resources
Moving on • Career development	• Further educational opportunities	

universities make greater use of electronic means for course content delivery and for communication. What does endure, however, is the systematic review of student support service needs and the integration of these needs into institutional considerations and planning for distance education.

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Biography

Judith Potter is Program Director for Part-time Degree Studies and Adult Learner Services at the University of New Brunswick. She has recently completed her doctorate in Adult Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto.

Judith Potter est directrice des programmes pour les études avec crédits à temps partiel et des services aux apprenants adultes à l'Université du Nouveau-Brunswick. Elle a récemment complété son doctorat en éducation permanente à l'Institut d'études pédagogiques de l'Ontario/University of Toronto.