

Support Services That Matter: An Exploration of the Experiences and Needs of Graduate Students in a Distance Learning Environment

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Abstract

The purpose of this case study was to investigate the support needs, experiences, and expectations of a group of graduate distance learners. The method of inquiry involved the qualitative research techniques of interviews and document analysis. The results revealed three important findings. First, most students were not likely to take advantage of student support services. Second, students perceived their peers as important sources of academic and social support. Last, students expected their instructor to be a support resource and to be knowledgeable about the on-campus academic and administrative services.

Résumé

L'objectif de cette étude de cas était d'examiner les besoins de support, les expériences et les attentes d'un groupe d'étudiants de deuxième cycle en formation à distance. La méthode de recherche incluait les techniques qualitative de l'entrevue et de l'analyse de document. Les résultats ont révélé trois conclusions importantes. Premièrement, la plupart des étudiants avaient peu de chances de profiter des services de support aux étudiants. Deuxièmement, les étudiants perçoivent leurs pairs comme étant des sources importantes de support pédagogique et social. Finalement, les étudiants s'attendaient à ce que leur professeur soit une source de support et qu'il soit au courant des services pédagogiques et administratifs offerts sur le campus.

Distance education refers to education or training delivered to remote (off-campus) location(s) via print, audio, video (live or prerecorded), and/or computer technologies, including both synchronous and asynchronous instruction. In the 1994-1995 academic year, an estimated 753,640 students were enrolled in distance education courses at two-year and four-year institutions of higher education in the United States (Lewis, Snow, Farris, & Levin, 1999). By 1997-1998, the number of students had nearly doubled, with over 1,343,580 students enrolling. Most students taking distance education courses are undergraduates; however, most of

the students enrolling in distance education degree or professional programs are graduate students, with most majoring in computer science (108,710) followed by business management concentrations (42,610).

The growth in graduate student enrollment in distance education programs or certificates stems from the added advantage of course flexibility (Belcher, 1997). Students can take courses from preferred locations that are convenient to their schedules. This advantage is appealing to most adult learners because it accommodates their work schedules and permits flexibility to manage their family life (Kember, Lai, & Murphy, 1994).

Much of the research about graduate distance education focuses on academic experiences such as teaching effectiveness and course satisfaction. The amount of student interaction is seen as likely to improve distance learners' educational experiences (Andrusyszyn, Iwasiw, & Goldenberg, 1999; Wright, Marsh, & Miller, 2000). Therefore, it is important for instructors to develop means of creating dialogue with students. Students across distant sites and on-site can develop rapport and provide support to one another when the proper techniques and strategies incorporating student-to-student interaction are provided. The quality of distance education depends on the interaction and participation of the learners, so instructors in distance education settings must use the technology and generally prepare and plan for interaction in the classroom.

Others have examined media effectiveness to test if any differences exist by medium type (Navarro & Shoemaker, 2000; Nunan, 1999). In the comparison of media (e.g., traditional on-campus to distance on-line), it is likely that no significant difference in learning outcomes will be found (Navarro & Shoemaker, 2000). Media comparisons statistically almost guarantee that distance learners perform just as well as campus-based students (Lockee, Burton, & Cross, 1999).

Graduate students is another population that has been receiving more attention. Much of the focus surrounding this group centers on the academic learning experiences of distance graduate students. Although the literature is mostly based on descriptive reports, much of the attention is focused on instructional support (Agingu & Johnson, 1998) such as library services, rather than psychosocial support such as mentoring (Albrektson, 1995; Nuernberger, 1998), and orientation (Boyle & Boice, 1998; Poock, 2002).

Services that cater to the psychosocial needs of students are likely to assist students academically. For example, in an experimental design, a control group received neutral messages that conveyed general information, whereas the experimental group received more personal, caring (mentoring) messages (Hubschman, 1999). Participants in the mentored group had higher levels of satisfaction about being members of their academic program. These findings suggest that additional support has the

potential to help new students with their adjustment. Another study investigated the academic effect of on-line peer tutoring (Guri-Rozenblit, 1990). Those students that received weekly peer tutoring had higher course completion rates.

Although these studies are based on individual campus or classroom cases, they demonstrate the effectiveness of such programs. However, Cooper and Saunders (2000) caution against the development of intervention programs before determining if there is a true need. Such programs can be time-consuming, costly, and ineffective without obtaining an accurate analysis of the learner population (Schuh & Upcraft, 1998). Whatley, Staniford, and Beer (1999) reported that some graduate students found the use of on-line group collaboration to be ineffective because they lacked time in their daily schedules for participation. Individual campuses may need to investigate students' support needs before launching costly, major campus support initiatives.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of what information and service needs were important to graduate distance learners at a large doctorate-granting institution on the US east coast. In addition, we analyzed students' experiences and expectations related to academic support. For the purpose of this study, distance learners were defined as students using on-line, Web-based instruction at a distance from the main campus. Student support services were defined as academic support and personal/social services.

Individual graduate students who had taken distance learning courses from a large research institution on the eastern section of the US were interviewed for this case study. Throughout the process, the three investigators attempted to gain more knowledge and a better understanding of the current and future structure of support services for graduate distance learners at this institution. They also attempted to gain information previously unknown to them.

Specifically, we attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What did these graduate distance learners think about student support services being offered at their institution?
2. What were the experiences of those graduate distance learners using support services?
3. What support services were needed to meet the expectation of these graduate distance learners?

Methodology

Qualitative research focuses on understanding a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and world views of people involved (Merriam, 1998). As Merriam explained, in qualitative research "the key concern is under-

standing the phenomenon of interest from the participants' perspectives, not the researcher's" (p. 6).

This study used interviews to capture and portray the essence of the experiences of distance learners. Interviews were chosen in order to understand the experience of distance learners and the meaning they make of their experiences (Seidman, 1988). Interviewing affirmed the importance of each person's perspective without compromising the possibility of relationships between students' ideas and perspectives. A sample (also available in the Appendix) of the interview questions included: As a distance learner, what support services are available to you? Have you utilized the support services that are available to you by your institution as a student? What support services are currently unavailable to you as a distance-learning student? These interview questions, developed by the investigators, were tailored to the research questions that guided the inquiry. A pretest of the questions was conducted on two graduate students who had taken an on-line class. Modifications to the questions were made for additional clarification based on the experience of on-line students.

Participants and Setting

The participants in the study were eight distance-learning students, five women and three men. All were current graduate students and all were enrolled in the same graduate-level course. Six of the participants were out-of-state and lived away from the main campus. Two of the participants were in-state, but geographically 80 miles or more from the main campus. One participant had previously taken a distance-learning course in another country. The rest had previously taken courses at the main campus in some capacity. They either had exposure to a traditional lecture or by hybrid (i.e., using a combination of lecture and Web-based instruction), but not at a distance from the main campus. Six of the participants knew one another through previous class interactions from the main campus.

The participants came from a variety of age and ethnic backgrounds. To maintain confidentiality pseudonyms were used. Leroy, a Hispanic man in his early 30s, resided southeast Georgia. He was working as a part-time counselor while enrolled as a distance learner. Christy, a white woman in her early 20s, resided on the eastern shore of Virginia. She was working as a full-time resident director during her enrollment. Ken, a white man in his mid-20s, resided in Alaska. He was working as a residence coordinator while enrolled. Angela, a white woman in her late 20s, resided in southwest Virginia. She was working as a staff assistant. China, an Asian woman in her early 30s, resided in southwest Virginia. She was working as a part-time research analyst while enrolled. Jennifer, a white woman in her mid-20s, resided in eastern Virginia while enrolled

and worked part time. Miguel, a Hispanic man in his early 30s, resided in South Africa. He was not working while enrolled. Ron, an Asian man in his early 40s, resided in central Florida and worked as an athletic trainer while enrolled. Although student employment status was not a focus of this study, job descriptions were used to depict the setting that the students were in while enrolled in this on-line class.

The course was taught completely on line using a Web conferencing tool (Blackboard), which allowed students to preview and submit course materials to the instructor and among themselves both asynchronously and synchronously. Students mostly communicated with the instructor using e-mail. The students also had the option of contact with the instructor by phone. The course required the students to work in groups of four. When working in groups, the students were asked to set up designated times to communicate via relay chat at least once a week for the duration of the seven-week summer term. One group project was required to be submitted by the end of the term. Students were also asked to interact with one another by posting and reading responses listed on the threaded discussion board. The instructor posted a topic once a week for responses.

Data Collection

The research technique consisted of semistructured interviews. This technique offers the interviewer the opportunity to probe issues and obtain feedback. It also allows the conversation to flow freely to enable discussion of issues rather than cutting someone off because he or she strays from the topic. The interviews took place at the main campus where the students returned to take courses in the fall semester. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes each. Field notes, which included the on-line course syllabus and the institution's distance learning department Web site, was also used as part of the data collection.

Analysis

Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed. Category construction was the chosen technique for analysis, which "captures recurring patterns that cut across preponderance" (Merriam, 1998, p. 179). This process involved continual comparisons of the respondents' remarks. In addition, the investigators also viewed the electronic messages that were sent to the participants from the instructors.

To establish trustworthiness, the investigators first used the technique of methodological triangulation. Methodological triangulation is the use of multiple methods to study a single problem or program (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). It may consist of comparing two or more data-collection sources to check for validity. In this study, interviews and course content

serve as the primary documents. The data collected from these sources were checked against one another to determine whether one participant's comments differed from others' and to determine whether the student's perceptions were consistent with university policy, procedure, and general service offerings. The investigators then looked for patterns and consistency (i.e., similar illustrations by the participants) from the words provided by the interviewees. A matrix was used to organize the categories of data and to help obtain a better visualization of any developing patterns.

The second phase of the data analysis was peer triangulation (Merriam, 1998). Peer triangulation allowed the investigators to review and compare their interpretations of the data (Stake, 1995). Using a common set of codes (e.g., PS—peer support, FS—faculty support, AS—academic support, I—important, SWI—somewhat important, NI—not important), each then coded the statements by reviewing the remarks from the interviewees separately. After the coding was completed, each investigator checked the codes of the others for consistency. This technique allowed us to check whether the data were being portrayed accurately according to the coding categories.

Role of the Researcher

Investigators can influence qualitative data. In order for the investigators in this study to provide unaffected, natural data, they must understand and practice their role in the study (Merriam, 1998). We articulated the roles that each of us would assume and acknowledged any biases that might influence the data. The primary influence we acknowledged was that we each knew some of the participants. To reduce the amount of influence this could have on data, we paired the investigators with interviewees they knew less well.

Summary of the Findings

Three major findings resulted from the investigations. The first was that this graduate student group had a minimum need to receive institutional support. Students did not perceive a strong need for support services and thus did not take advantage of many services provided by the institution. A second finding was that students placed a higher value on their psychosocial connection with peers. The third finding was that these students expected their instructor to be their support for academic-related matters.

Student Services Needs

Graduate distance learners were not likely to take advantage of academic or personal support services offered by the institution. When we asked graduate students to express their thoughts about on-line support, five

were not aware that such services existed or felt they did not need such services. These were the two major findings that resulted from the guiding research question: What do distant learners think about student support services that are offered to them?

In understanding why some of the students did not know about the services available to them, it is necessary to highlight how the students received campus related information. First, students received an e-mail message from their academic department about distance course offerings. Once students registered for the course electronically, they received an e-mail from the distance education department. Included in this e-mail was basic information on what to expect, available on-line resources (e.g., bookstore orders, technical support, student accounts, enrollment services), and a university staff contact list. A hyperlink to all resources available to them on the Department of Distance Education (DDE) Web page was embedded in this e-mail. Leroy mentioned that the e-mail contained so much information that he did not bother to look at all the services available to him. Others did not recall receiving an e-mail message from the DDE, although we did confirm that the department sent an e-mail to all registered distance learners.

The next major finding was a disconnection between students and support services. Students seem to be disengaged from, and sometimes unaware of, the support services available to them. Only three graduate students said they would have taken advantage of the services, even if made aware of them. The following excerpts illustrate students' thoughts on why they did not use many of the support services.

Ken: In terms of nonacademic support services, I did not feel I needed them. I don't know if available I would have used them.

Angela: I know there was an office you could call if you had problems as well as an Internet service. Since I did not have any problems, I did not use the services.

Jennifer: Well, as I said, it had no effect for me because I did not use them. I can say no one ever told us about the support services. I found out about them on my own fairly late in the course.

Leroy: There was a link sent for services. Just click here if you need help with finance. Click here if you need help from the graduate school people, click here with, whatever it was. I didn't have to use that, but it was sent to me.

The feelings students expressed about academic support services may be related to their already having taken a course at the main campus, thus being more prepared for academic rigor and familiar with the resources available. Christy went on to say, "Maybe if this was my first graduate

course I might have needed more support, but since I had a year of being on campus and knew my professor, I knew where to get my support.”

Although these students did not make much use of the on-line services offered by the main campus, they did use academic-related services near their place of residence, primarily the library and the bookstore. As part of their class assignments, students were responsible for conducting research, which required them to use some library services. Most students used the library resources nearest to their residence rather than using the on-line services offered on the main campus. Ken, Christy, Angela, and Leroy each mentioned that they preferred this option because it was more convenient. The following excerpt from Ken’s interview best expresses the feeling of the interviewees.

My situation was unique in that I was heavily involved at another campus, which allowed me access to my own academic and nonacademic resources. I think I was in a more favorable position than other people might have been because I was satisfied with the resources that were available at the campus near me.

The students had the option of using the on-line bookstore to purchase their books for class. Several of the interviewees purchased their books from an on-line retailer rather than ordering them from the main campus. The primary reason students did not take advantage of the campus bookstore services was that on-line retailers, such as Amazon and Barnes & Noble, offered discounted prices. The campus bookstore was primarily used for comparing prices.

Jennifer: The book was available at the bookstore for \$45 or \$50. I was already in Boston and I did not want to pay that much for it to be sent to me. So I purchased the book on-line from another retailer for about \$30.

Ron: I purchased mine at an on-line bookstore. The professor listed different Web sites of how to purchase our books. We knew in a good amount of time. Five Web sites were listed. People were able to purchase their books actually cheaper than the bookstore and they received them within two to three days.

Academic and Psychosocial Support

As mentioned above, academic-related services were not widely used by most of these graduate students; however, they did express a need for academic and psychosocial support. Some students said that they were able to find both academic and psychosocial support from their on-line classmates, and others noted that they found additional academic support from their professor.

One common finding mentioned by the participants was the social connections established with other peers. Some students obtained a high

level of social connection with peers. whereas others found this difficult to create. Angela mentioned the importance of “having a personal touch” involved in her distance learning course. The ability to connect with other classmates on an academic and social level improved her student experience. However, some interviewees tended to think that taking a distance education course discouraged socialization. Christy and Leroy found it difficult to establish relationships with their classmates and professor due to the lack of face-to-face contact. Christy mentioned that she completed the course “without establishing any personal or professional bonds.” Some of the student participants believed that a significant function of the graduate program was the establishment of social networks where students could share academic and professional experiences. In addition, they mentioned that taking a distance-learning course made it more difficult to establish connections with other classmates. As a solution, some expressed the need for some type of communal meeting prior to the beginning of classes, although they recognized that this presented geographical challenges. Others thought this could be accomplished using the technology available to them. For example, Leroy and Ken mentioned that their experience could have been improved if more emphasis was placed on students establishing their own Web sites complete with a photo of themselves, and arranging some type of social chat or threaded discussion. Students were capable of creating this type of social network on their own using the course software, but five opted not to take advantage of it because their professor did not initiate its use.

The instructor was also seen as an important source of support to these students. When students had questions about academic and administrative matters, most often they sought assistance from the course professor. Leroy and Angela stated that they primarily relied on their professor and looked to him as their main source of support. For example, Leroy stated that at the beginning of the course he had experienced problems ordering his textbook. He said the professor provided him with additional resources for locating the book. Students tended to feel that their professor was more than competent and knowledgeable about any questions or issues that arose. For the most part these graduate students had few issues that needed to be addressed.

Student Expectations of Support

Two central findings concerned expectations for the delivery of institutional services and support. First, most of the participants felt that the instructor was a primary source for academic support. Therefore, students had high expectations for the timing and promptness of the professor’s responses to questions and inquiries. The questions and inquiries ranged

from feedback on course assignments to administrative details and technology issues.

Second, students expected to have round-the-clock assistance available to them. Some interviewees mentioned the need for some form of 24-hour service to be available to address institution-related questions. For example, Miguel stated, "The support services that are needed are not available, such as a 24-hour hotline." Some students suggested hiring student service counselors who would respond round-the-clock. These students also mentioned the medium source of a chat room as a possible option as well. This was particularly important for students who lived in a different time zone than the institution offering the course. Leroy discussed his concern because of the four-hour time difference he experienced from being located in Alaska. "If I needed to call the main campus, I would have to do so early in the morning because of the four-hour difference in time." Therefore, he continued to advocate the need for campus services that were not confined to time zones.

All the participants discussed the need for some type of interaction that would assist them in getting to know each other. They agreed that some type of person-to-person contact was essential to having an enjoyable learning experience, at least at the beginning of the course.

Another expectation was that they be kept informed about current campus events, in particular, those that affected distance learners. Christy suggested that the institution have an on-line newsletter to inform students about policy changes, administrative updates, and sporting events. Although some mentioned the importance of being kept informed, few said they would actually participate in on-line-related campus activities.

Discussion

For distance learners involved in this case study, little value was placed on support services. At least five of the interviewees did not recognize or could not identify various types of services that were available to them. Even if services were available to them, these students were not likely to take advantage of them. Hahs (1998) found similar results in his study of traditional graduate students where only 35% were interested in academic and financial services. Similarly, this case study found that graduate students were likely to have been exposed to the demands of college and have a sense of what it takes to be a successful college student, thus limiting their need to use support resources.

Some students said that their peers were an important source of support. In these cases students were able to connect and share advice and common experiences as distance learners. The use and effectiveness of peer support is widely documented in the literature (Andrusyszyn et al., 1999; Dorn & Papalewis, 1997; Liddell, 1997). This peer interaction exposes

students to learning and provides informal support. The results of this case study provide additional support for the need to create meaningful student-to-student interaction.

The instructor was perceived as an important source of support for academic and administrative matters. It is evident that the instructor holds a leadership role and is in a position to provide support. However, as students in this study noted, the timeliness and promptness of the instructor's response is particularly important. Effective communication is significant because it has been found to be highly correlated with teacher effectiveness (Young & Shaw, 1999). Effective communication is a major concern when considering support services because it can be more challenging at a distance.

In addition, students expected their professor to have knowledge of campus support resources. Four of the students expected around-the-clock support, particularly those in different time zones from the main campus. Interestingly, few students mentioned taking advantage of such services although they had high expectations for the university to provide them. This probably crosses the boundary of identifying what a true service need is versus a service desired. It was also important that the professor be available to respond to student questions in a timely manner. The interviewees also depended on the professor to answer nonacademic questions.

Implications for Graduate Student Support

This study has three major implications for practice. First, it is important that institutions develop a needs assessment plan before creating and implementing any support services. As we discovered, students were not apt to use the main campus services, instead preferring to use the services that provided geographic convenience and affordability. In addition, if institutions offer support services, it is important to communicate the availability of these services effectively. We noticed that at least five of the students were unaware of the services that were available to them. It may not be enough to communicate via e-mail. Other communication methods should be sought such as postal mailings, electronic bulletin board postings, electronic newsletters, mailed newsletters, and/or having the course instructor list available services on the course Web site. In addition, some form of orientation might be needed to provide this information to students more formally and to provide them with opportunities for interaction among themselves. This type of orientation could take place on line via computer conferencing.

Second, some form of peer-to-peer support should be established. Pairing or grouping students with similar experience is one method that may

create a positive social environment among peers. Another option is for the course instructor to develop a community forum that allows students to interact with one another informally. This forum could be introduced at the beginning of the course. It is important that the instructor promotes and encourages this type of dialogue. As noted, students are less likely to participate if the instructor does not encourage their involvement.

Third, faculty of distance learning courses should be familiar with most of the resources on campus because students are likely to seek out the faculty first for support. In addition, faculty members should design a system or protocol that informs students of when they are likely to respond to their questions or concerns. We noticed that students had high expectations for prompt responses to questions sent to their professor.

In conclusion, through this study we attempted to explain the support service needs, experiences, and expectations of a sample of graduate distance learners. Although this study is limited to the students and institution involved, it provides a foundation to investigate students' support needs on other campuses.

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Appendix A Interview Guide Support Services that Matter to Distance Learners

Background Questions

Please describe for me why you chose to take a distance learning course?

1. When did you initially become interested in taking a distance learning courses?
2. What characteristics do you think distance learning students may have in common?
3. How do you think your institution views distance learners?

Subject Matter

1. As a distance learner what support services are available to you?
2. As a distance learning student, have you utilized the support services that are available to you by your institution as a student?
3. What support services are currently unavailable to you as a distance learning student?
4. As a distance learning student, what support services are important to you?
5. As a distance learning student, what support services help do you expect to receive from you institution without asking?
6. What do you think distance learning instructors and administrators need to know in order to be more effective regarding distance education?
7. To what extent are the support services provided to distance learning students assisting your academic and non-academic endeavors?
8. How do support services for distance learners' affect your overall satisfaction regarding distance learning?
9. How would a committee made up of distance learners' assist or hinder the development of support services for distance education?
10. Some say that students who take distance learning courses lack people skills. How do you feel about that statement?

Future Considerations

1. Looking forward five years from now, what impact will support services in distance education have on traditionally residential campuses?
2. As a student, what are some support services or activities that need to be considered for the future?

3. Are there other aspects of support services regarding distance education that should be addressed? If so what are they?
4. What is the most important thing you want the researchers to know about support services for distance learners?