

Distance Education:

Breaking barriers to learning

By Mary Preston

Never before has life-long learning been so important. In our changing global economy, nothing is static; the need to update one's skills and education is necessary to survive the fluctuations and upheavals of the employment marketplace. However, trying to squeeze courses and homework into an already hectic lifestyle can be a true challenge. For many students, distance education is an attractive option. Distance education offers flexible hours and convenience, with no geographical barriers to limit choice in courses or institutions.

Enrollment in distance education is increasing, and universities and colleges are responding to the demand by providing a greater selection of courses. Newer technologies provide greater opportunities for students to access "real-time" (synchronous) instruction through teleconferencing via audio, video or computer, or Internet based "chat room" lectures. Course materials are provided through combinations of audio and videocassettes, printed materials, correspondence, lectures posted on the Internet and by emails; the variety of learning materials and flexible delivery methods allow distance students to customize their learning experience.

Online (over the Internet) courses are helping fuel the growth in demand for distance education. According to Linda Rees, Manager of Off-Campus Learning for Algonquin College in Ottawa, "People are ready for online distance learning." She adds, "In the last 3 years we have seen a 100% increase in distance learning registrations in general; almost all of that increase was a result of developments in online education." Algonquin currently has approximately 5,000 students registered in distance education with a fifty-fifty split between those enrolled in online courses and those enrolled in correspondence courses. While over the last few years the number of correspondence students has remained relatively stable, Rees notes that the registrations in online courses have grown dramatically.

Richard Malinski, from Ryerson University, has also noticed an increase in registrations in distance education. He writes, "Current figures for this semester are not complete yet, but there are almost

2,000 registrations." Malinski says that although the area with the most growth is in online education "both print and audio courses are still doing fine."

At Humber College, over 1,000 students are registered in distance education: 65% in Internet-based, online courses and 40% in print-based correspondence courses. Paul Avon, Manager Life-long Learning Services of the School of Information Technologies at Humber says that online distance education is growing at Humber. He notes the importance of offering a critical mass of courses to students so that they can complete full certificates or programs entirely through distance education. He adds that, "Humber's long-term strategy is to produce more complete distance education programs for all basic courses." Avon stresses that, "For online education to be successful, institutions must have the technical infrastructure to support the programs in place, including necessary networks, technical support staff, help-desks, phone support, and easy registration systems for the students."

Although more students are considering distance education, educators warn that not all students are compatible with this method of learning. The flexibility of distance education fits in with most busy schedules, but the success of the student depends on them having self-discipline and good organizational skills. In fact, Avon believes that only 15 to 20 % of students are suitable (candidates) for success in distance education. He cautions, "Students taking distance courses need to be highly motivated and disciplined to succeed."

Students enrolled in distance learning agree that despite the many advantages to distance education there are some drawbacks. Katie McMahon is a stay-at-home mother currently enrolled in the Technical Writing Certificate Program at Humber College through distance learning. "I chose a distance learning course because it fit in better with my daily life...I like the flexibility that it offers; I can get my reading done during naptimes and in the evenings," she says. "The hour or two online for chat sessions helps to get my brain juices flowing and gives me some adult interaction." McMahon explains that course materials for her course are provided in learning modules and assignments posted on the Internet. Weekly chat sessions in a virtual classroom provide "real-time" lectures by an online instructor. She cautions that, "For those who are not motivated it would be easy to fall

behind since there is no one looking over your shoulder making sure you get the work done."

Trish Baird, a distance student at Ryerson University, is working on a certificate in Long Term Care Administration. She sees many advantages to distance education. "As a student you can do the work in your own time, and at your convenience. You don't have to leave your home to take the course." Baird sees other pluses including increased accessibility for those students who "are geographically near the school but cannot physically get out of their home because of disability, safety, and transportation issues." She also notes that distance courses provide greater choices in courses and programs from a multitude of sources. She is thankful to have, "the ability to access courses that are too far (geographically) to attend on a weekly basis."

Baird mentions some disadvantages too. "It is difficult to access good resources (journals, periodicals) for assignments if you live in a rural area, and not near a major library," she says. "It can be difficult keeping yourself motivated to do the readings and check out the resources without a professor or other students pressuring you to have the work done." She points out that working at home on courses has its distractions. "There is always a load of laundry to do, a walk with the dog or kids' homework—all of which seem much more exciting than reading a text book or posting comments on-line." She also feels that distance education can be isolating at times because of the lack of good discussion and debate with other classmates. Although online courses provide more interactions through chat groups and discussion bulletin boards, students need to have the required technology to make full use of the online learning experience. As Baird says, "Your computer (and Internet connection) need to be up-to-date so that you are not frustrated by the slowness of accessing the information from the school's (Web) site."

With new demands on colleges and universities to meet the needs of a growing clientele of life-long learners, distance learning is certainly an attractive solution. Innovations in distance education are breaking down barriers to learning for students all over the world. Nevertheless, individual students need to evaluate if distance education suits their own particular study habits and learning style. Despite the convenience and opportunities that distance education

provides—students need to be self-directed, organized, and highly motivated to succeed.

To find out more about distance education opportunities, visit the Office of Learning Technologies at <http://olt-bta.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/seek/search.html> or the Network for Ontario Distance Educators Website at <http://node.on.ca>.

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