DISTANCE EDUCATION AND WOMEN
Final Project

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Statistics reveal that the majority of distance learners in North America are women who are often managing multiple life roles. Many women are attracted to the flexibility and accessibility of DE and its potential for attainment alongside childrearing. For women who have committed to raising their children at home, pursuing their education by DE is seen as an ideal opportunity and possibility. As such, one major consideration in examining DE for women is childbearing/parenting and how women incorporate this significant time into their already existing professional goal-oriented activities. Pregnancy and motherhood affects all aspects of a woman's life including the biological, psychological, and social; finding a way to balance these factors along with educational goals is vital to their success.

Many women have made a conscious decision to pursue tertiary education alongside childbearing and childrearing without prior knowledge as to what this endeavor entails. Von Prummer (2000) asserted "in reality the everyday lives of family women are characterized by a degree of chaos and constant interruptions, where the mother is at the beck and call of her children (and sometimes her husband) and their immediate needs which tend to take precedence over the women's desire for uninterrupted and concentrated study time".

Women face many barriers/challenges when pursuing post-secondary education through DE and the effects of these barriers on them can cause undue stress and attrition. Cross (1981) has identified three types of barriers that women face: situational, dispositional, and institutional. Situational barriers include lack of support from family, friends, and employer. Dispositional barriers include lack of self-confidence, fear of failure, and anxiety related to computer usage. Examples of institutional barriers include lack of technical assistance, support services (counselling), and access to library and administration needs. These barriers can be the source of many difficulties such as chronic stress, decreased motivation, and inability to cope with heavy courseloads.

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Final Project Letter of Intent

Campus of Alberta Applied Psychology: Counselling Initiative

Issues and Perspectives in Women and Distance Education:

A Guidebook

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Problem Statement and Project Rationale

Distance learning has been in existence for at least 100 years, and due to changes in technology, has advanced rapidly in the last forty years (Galusha, 2004). Distance Education (DE) is defined by Rezabek (1999) as:

> The transportation of information and the involvement of a learner in the acquisition of knowledge and understanding of an area of study through planned, usually structured, and organized (but also incidental) communication, that also uses supplemental resources and media-assisted two way communication, where the learner and instructor are separated by distance and/or time. (p. 12)

DE provides the opportunity for study with freedom in relation to time and place of study for those unable to attend traditional classroom based instruction. It allows for a high degree of flexibility for individuals pursuing education for professional purposes or as part of their leisure pursuits. Consistent with this perspective, Chung (1990) advocated that:

> Distance education provides opportunities for adults to change careers later in life; to enhance their skills and qualifications while retaining their jobs; to bring up a young family while continuing with their education; to keep up with ever-changing technologies; and to improve their social position and status. (p. 61)

In addition to vocation and vocational purposes, intellectual satisfaction/personal fulfillment, being a role model for family members (Furst-Bowe & Dittman, 2001), the privacy of home study (Leiper, 1993), and gaining cultural knowledge have also been identified as advantages to pursuing DE.

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As such, one major consideration in examining DE for women is childbearing/parenting and how women incorporate this significant time into their already existing professional goal-oriented activities. Pregnancy and motherhood affects all aspects of a woman's life including the biological, psychological, and social; finding a way to balance these factors along with educational goals is vital to their success.

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Women face many barriers/challenges when pursuing post-secondary education through DE and the effects of these barriers on them can cause undue stress and attrition. Cross (1981) has identified three types of barriers that women face: situational, dispositional, and institutional. Situational barriers include lack of support from family, friends, and employer. Dispositional barriers include lack of self-confidence, fear of failure, and anxiety related to computer usage. Examples of institutional barriers include lack of technical assistance, support services (counselling), and access to library and administration needs. These barriers can be the source of many difficulties such as chronic stress, decreased motivation, and inability to cope with heavy courseloads.

Andrusyszyn, Cragg, and Fraser (2004) purported that "technological advancements and the explosion of knowledge are making it more difficult to remain current and maintain professional competence" (p. 4). For many women, DE is one of the most convenient ways to accomplish both personal and professional goals simultaneously. Acknowledging and making provisions for

situational, dispositional, institutional, and other barriers has the potential to enhance the learning experience and quality of life of female distance learners.

The intent of this comprehensive literature review is to examine the history of DE and what the extant literature to date reveals as the trends, issues, and perspectives of women in DE. This writer will explore the scholarly literature on women and DE, barriers and challenges that women learners face and coping strategies that these women learners can utilize to support their success in DE studies. Subsequently, these influencing factors will form the basis for the development of a guidebook for women embarking on DE. The development of this guidebook will be emergent based on the issues and perspectives discovered; however, it may include relevant aspects of the DE female learner's reality such as concerns, needs, successes, and celebrations. This guidebook will strive to alleviate some of the anxieties and frustrations that females may experience as a result of their new role as a post-secondary DE student by presenting coping strategies that other female DE students have utilized.

<div align="center">Reference to Literature</div>

As mentioned previously, keeping updated with technology, and remaining current in the workforce (fulfilling employer expectations) can be difficult, and for many women who assume multiple life roles, DE is one of the most convenient and flexible ways to fulfill their aspirations.

Houle (as cited in Qureshi, Morton & Antosz, 2004) classified DE learners into a three-category system. He described *Goal-oriented learners* as "those who use learning to gain specific objectives, such as learning to deal with particular family problems, learning better business practices, or pursuing a particular area of interest" (p. 3). *Activity-oriented learners* are "those who participate primarily for the sake of the activity itself, to join a group, or to escape an unhappy situation" (p. 3) and *Learning-oriented learners* are "those who pursue learning for its own sake, the lifelong learners" (p. 3). Given the increasing expectations of employers and the

apparent motivations towards self-directed, lifelong learning it stands to reason that the number of DE learners will continue to increase into the 21st century.

Srivastava (2002) stated that **"Enrollment in higher education has been on the rise and so has the number of female graduates"** (p. 6). At Athabasca University (AU), Canada's Open University situated in Athabasca, AB, "the proportion of women graduates grew steadily in the past five years from 38 percent in 1998-99 to 54 percent in 2002-03" (AU 2003 Annual Report). AU currently has 24,136 students (22,019 undergraduate and 2117 graduate) enrolled in DE courses (AU Student Enrollment: Statistics, 2004).

Most studies of distance learners in North America have indicated that more women than men are enrolled in courses through DE. Typically a distance learner is 1) older than the typical undergraduate, 2) female, 3) likely to be employed full-time, and 4) married (Thompson, 2004). Bontempi (2004) reported that the majority of distance learners are between 25 and 34 years old and over seventy percent of recent graduates who studied by distance worked full time during their degree program. It is significant to mention here that childbearing years are also typically between the ages of 25 and 34.

In September of 2001 a report released by the American Association of University Women (Carlson, 2001) indicated that women who take DE courses face substantially more challenges than do men. Reflective of some of these challenges, Cross (1981) maintained that the five most prevalent barriers are (a) lack of money, (b) not enough time, (c) forgot how to study and too difficult, (d) student thought they were too old, and (e) institution was too far away. Furst-Bowe and Dittmann (2001) stated, **"Balancing a job, family, community and academic responsibilities can be a major challenge"** (p. 405). Lack of student support and services, difficulties accessing necessary childcare, insufficient time and energy for studies due to employment or family responsibilities, change of job or residence, changed family responsibilities, lack of financial

support, illness of self or family member, and pregnancy are all factors that can hinder academic success. Also, Galusha (2004) mentioned that a "student's lack of adequate hardware and the subsequent cost barrier of obtaining equipment could place undue hardship on some remote students" (p. 9).

Geographical isolation and lack of social interactions with other students is a major problem for DE students according to Galusha (2004) and can lead to feelings of alienation and the denied perception that they belong to a scholarly community. Burke (2001) described "expectations and attitudes, arising from their position in society" (p. 610) as an obstacle to women's success in their studies. She also indicated that lack of social support, lack of guidance, study conditions at home, and lack of communication are anxiety-promoting challenges that women in DE can experience.

Another difficulty encountered by DE students is lack of experience and training in reference to technical issues (e.g., e-mailing, word processing) and DE (Galusha, 2004). This inexperience can promote feelings of insecurity and helplessness. Student inability to manage the volume or level of work has also been mentioned throughout DE literature as a challenge to learning.

The fact that most DE learners are female and that these women face a multitude of barriers/challenges (including multiple life roles) speaks to the importance of examining and reporting on the perceptions of these learners and learning from their unique experiences. A culminating guidebook geared for women who are involved or considering becoming involved in DE learning will provide support and normalization of the experience for these women.

Method

A comprehensive literature review will serve to explore the evolution of DE, reveal the issues and perspectives in women and DE and provide rationale for further study into this area. I have identified a wide range of preliminary sources and primary research journals as appropriate

and relevant to my topic. Various primary research journals include the *American Journal of Distance Education Report, New Horizons in Adult Education,* and the *Distance Education Report*. Texts such as *Women and Distance Education: Challenges and Opportunities* by Christine von Prummer, *Feminist Critique of Adult and Continuing Education* by June Thompson, the *Handbook of Distance Education* by Moore and Anderson, and *The Third Shift* by Cheris Kramarae will also provide useful and pertinent data. Searches using databases such as Academic Search Premier, PsychINFO, EBSCO host, EMBASE: Excerpta Medica, PsychArticles, and Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection will be conducted. Search words potentially used will be: trends in DE; issues in DE; women and DE; gender and DE; successes in DE; perspectives of women in DE.

This writer will analyze and consolidate the literature in an organized and meaningful fashion to inform future research and aid as a resource for women entering DE through the development of a guidebook. The following outline is a tentative template for the literature review and subsequent guidebook.

1. What is DE?

2. Brief overview of the history of DE

3. Trends in DE (e.g., student/enrolment, technology, academic, faculty, economic)

4. Who are the users of DE? (e.g., characteristics, demographics, statistics)

5. Why do women learners choose DE over traditional education?

6. Issues women face in DE (e.g., gender gap, androcentrism, childbearing/parenting)

7. My Journey (e.g., introduction, personal experience with DE)

8. How to make DE work for you

9. Successes and Celebrations

Sections 1 to 6 will form the central basis of the literature review and will be summarized briefly, in a user-friendly way, in the guidebook. The brief overview of the history of DE will include information accumulated from searches of literature published from January 1975 to the present time, 2005. Information highlighting trends in DE, current issues affecting women in DE, potential barriers and facilitative factors (successes and celebrations) in the experience will be drawn primarily from the last 15 years.

Section 7 (my experience with DE) will follow the aforementioned summarization, as will sections 8 and 9. Section 8 will be more extensive in nature and will constitute the practical component of the guidebook. Section 9 will provide stories of hope and inspiration for the DE student as she begins her journey.

Implications

As Conhaim (2003) suggested **"**Online higher education is part of the growing trend in lifelong learning" (p. 1). Women must integrate their post-secondary education into lives characterized by multiple roles such as employee, wife/partner, mother, family member, caregiver, and volunteer. Many women are "torn between self-development, careers, and family commitments" (Younes & Asay, 1998, as cited in Fram & Bonvillian, 2001, p. 2). Stressors can produce strain in the individual's biological, psychological and social systems, which can result in attrition and chronic stress.

The gathering of information in the area of women and DE and the development of a guidebook will be beneficial to female DE learners in that they could become more aware of what it takes for them to accomplish their academic and career goals. A user-friendly guidebook that complements current scholarly literature would provide necessary steps for success for women students embarking on their DE journey. An emphasis, in this review, on the successes and celebrations of women in DE would reveal to new DE women learners that success is within

their reach. I aim to provide encouragement, hope, and instil a firm belief that with motivation and perseverance, accomplishing career goals is not only a distinct possibility but a probability.

The review and guidebook will additionally provide an overview of relevant and useful information that will assist in informing developers, administrators, and instructors of DE programs in fostering more effective delivery of integrated support and flexible learning technologies to women students of DE programs.

Additionally, this research will add to the body of literature in the area of DE. Steps will be taken to disseminate this research at conferences such as the Canadian Association for Distance Education (CADE) Conference, the Web-Based Teaching and Learning (NAWeb) Conference and the Association for Media and Technology in Education (AMTEC) Conference. Findings will be submitted to various DE journals such as the CADE: Journal of Distance Education, the CJLT: Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology, the New Horizons in Adult Education Journal and the Distance Education Report.

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