Learners and Learner Services:
The Key to the Future in Open Distance Learning[1]

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This chapter considers the place of learner services in the rapidly changing field of open distance learning, with a focus on the goals of institutional responsiveness and facilitating student success. It takes the position that provision of learner services is one of the key ways in which those engaged in distance teaching can demonstrate a commitment to learner-centredness in order to become more competitive and better positioned strategically to serve the pressing demand for high-quality, accessible education and training.

This chapter does not advocate a particular set of services as being most effective for all distance learners and institutions. Rather, recognizing the importance of contextual considerations, it begins with a discussion of core issues in the development and delivery of learner services. These include defining the role of learner services within the context of an institution's culture and value system, the linking of practice to research findings in developing strategies to facilitate student success, and the emerging trends that will influence future developments in learner services. Although the author draws on experience gained mainly in large single- and dual-mode post-secondary distance teaching institutions, the issues identified are generic and will likely be of equal concern to distance education practitioners in a variety of settings.

The presentation of issues is followed by a discussion of some specific practices in linking learner services to learner needs. In this section of the chapter, some basic research findings about student behaviour in distance learning are used to illustrate how research can be applied in the context of an explicit value system regarding student learning to develop a set of strategies to facilitate learner persistence and success.

The Analysis section elaborates on the implications of the changing context within which distance education practices are evolving, and discusses some of the forces that work toward and against development of more responsive systems.

Finally, the last section of this chapter underlines how learner services can play a key role in the strategic positioning of an institution or distance education service. Some specific examples of how learner services can respond to emerging trends in education are identified.

Issues

Integration of Learner Services into the Institutional Culture

The development of comprehensive learner services in distance education is a fairly recent endeavour. Most early distance education schemes were concerned more with access and availability of learning opportunities than with the individual experience of the learner. Consequently, distance education has been typified by high enrolments and high rates of attrition (Keegan, 1983). Student support services for distance learners were first developed as a defensive response to the high percentage of "casualties' produced by the mass education model that once characterized distance education.

Early forms of student support were usually course-content based. The tutor became the human interface between the learner and the course package. Instructional support helped to personalize and humanize an essentially industrial model of education, the main feature of which was the mass production of instructional materials that could be efficiently disseminated to large numbers of students. As open and distance learning systems became a more common way for people to gain access to formal education, concern about learner success grew, along with interest in how it might be promoted.

In Canada, the concern about lack of student persistence was manifested in the development of a wide variety of student support services in distance teaching institutions. These services, described by McInnis-Rankin and Brindley (1986), include orientation and information, admissions and other registry services, advising and counselling, instructional support (tutoring/teaching), and student advocacy. McInnis-Rankin and Brindley discussed the rationale for student support as largely being a method for helping students to cope with the special demands of distance education, and in particular, to help those students who enter distance education with less than adequate skills or preparation.

While these goals for student services are legitimate and necessary, they do not speak to the core values and beliefs that might drive an institution to interact with learners in a particular way. The danger in this is that learner services are simply student retention strategies which have been tacked onto distance education programs in response to concern about high attrition rates, and as such, they can easily be removed in times of fiscal restraint or as priorities within an institution change. In Canada, and elsewhere, when institutions have looked for cost savings, the first and deepest cuts have often been made to learner services (Paul, 1988). All too often, it appears that services such as tutoring, advising, and counselling are not seen as an integral part of the core business in open distance institutions.

In the last 10 years, there has been growing concern with the inadequacy and inappropriateness of the industrial model of distance education (Evans and Nation, 1989; Sewart, 1993; Sweet, 1993; Tait, 1988; Tait, in press). Sweet (1993), in a comprehensive synthesis of literature, discusses the centrality of student support services in making distance learning more responsive to changing environments, and the strong trend toward developmental and constructivist approaches in learning and teaching. Sweet's analysis thoughtfully considers the evidence for a changing view of the learner as more instrumental and active in the learning process, and makes a strong case for changes in the development and delivery of instruction and other learner services to accommodate a constructivist view of learning. However, in this assertion lies a great challenge to distance education institutions to reconsider how they do business.

In most single- and dual-mode distance learning institutions that I have visited or with which I have worked, development of course materials and technology often take precedence over learner support systems in resource allocation. Thompson (1990), in discussing the results of a study indicating that distance learners would like more interaction with instructional staff, notes that, "Many institutions which offer correspondence courses invest substantial resources in the development of the course materials" (p. 63). He cites Moore (1989) in noting that the United Kingdom Open University spends roughly the same amount "on preparation of course materials as on learner support." In fact, in many institutions, the balance is probably tipped more heavily toward course development, particularly where resources are scarce and there is outside pressure to open new programs or increase enrolments. However, within the industrial model of distance education, which tends to treat knowledge as a commodity to be disseminated and learner services as a supplement, this balance of resource allocation is not surprising.

The challenge for distance education services in becoming more responsive to their clientele is to assess priorities continually within the context of a set of principles that clearly articulate beliefs about learners and how the learning process can be facilitated. In the current context where continual change, high expectations, and constantly shifting demands are the norm in the educational system, such defined direction is essential.

Linking Practice to Research

Whether stated or not, underlying every model of learner services is an implicit assumption about the goals of education (sometimes articulated in the mission of an institution or service but not necessarily applied consistently) and how the particular services offered "support" these goals. However, practice is not often explicitly based on theory, and even when it is, systematic evaluation is not always carried out to test and continually refine the rationale for practice. For example, when effectiveness of the services is measured, how is "effectiveness" defined? Does it mean that enrolments have increased by 25 percent? Does it mean that more students can demonstrate mastery of course content? Does it mean that students require less interaction with the institution in their second and third courses because they know how to set up their own support system? Does it mean more graduates are successfully employed? Does it mean that more students are completing courses? The point here, if it is not already abundantly clear, is that the epistemology underlying learner services in distance education is not always well defined or systematically tested (Coldeway, 1986).

Ten years ago, one of the most discussed and researched questions in distance education was why so many students who choose to enrol in this mode of study also choose not to complete their course(s). Attrition research has been fruitful to the extent that it has provided a great deal of information about the complex interplay of factors that lead to student attrition, and certain predictable patterns of student behaviour in distance courses. However, until recently, there has been little discussion about how to use this knowledge the better to understand the learning process and to serve learners by improving the quality of their experience.

There are examples of some specific services that have been designed to respond to an identified learner need (Delehanty, 1986). However, compared with other fields in distance education-for example, instructional design-it does not appear that development of learner services has been approached in any systematic fashion, nor is there evidence of much longitudinal research to evaluate the effectiveness of services in meeting stated goals.

Presumably, learner services are designed and offered to encourage students to persist in their studies, but to what end? What kind of learners is open distance learning trying to produce, and what implications does this have for the types of learner services offered? While it is encouraging that there is now a growing literature base that recognizes the need to reflect more critically on the teaching and learning process in distance education (Evans & Nation, 1989; 1992), most of this writing focusses on the design of learning materials, the use of technologies, and the tutoring or instructional function. Not a great deal of research attention has been given to other types of interactions with learners, such as the provision of information, orientation, advising, counselling, provision of library and administrative services, and the role that these interactions might play in a developmental or constructive model of learning.

The Changing Environment

As has been stated, learner services in distance education were first developed in response to criticism about high attrition rates within an essentially industrial model of education. To a certain extent, the development of tutoring, counselling, library, and other support systems formed part of the defensive stance against accusations that distance open learning is a second-class educational system.

However, the environment within which learner services were first developed has drastically changed, and forces outside distance education institutions are shifting the focus away fi7om learner success back to access and speed of production (King, 1993; Paul, 1993). Distance learning is no longer viewed as an aberration, or an educational method of last resort. In fact, the pendulum has probably now swung too far in the opposite direction. Open distance learning is increasingly seen as the answer to all that is wrong with the current educational system. While practitioners in distance education are moving away from the industrial model of mass education, which was first described by Peters (1971), to take a more learner-centred approach (Sweet, 1993), the government and the private sector often see open distance learning systems as "high tech," inexpensive, and quick methods to provide education and training. However, if there is any message that must continually be given to those who place demands on distance education institutions, it is the complexity of the work. Distance education practitioners face all the same challenges as their campus-based colleagues and more.

There is increasing pressure on those engaged in distance teaching to use new technologies to provide greater access and reduce costs of education, and yet the complexities of choosing and malting use of technologies in education are appreciated by few (see Paul, 1993).

Widespread economic changes have sent underemployed and newly unemployed adults looking for opportunities for further education and/or retraining. These learners are attracted to the flexibility that open distance learning offers, However, they present a new challenge. They come with an even wider variety of backgrounds than was the case for adult students a decade ago. Many are educationally disadvantaged, and often, independent learning is entirely unfamiliar to them.

Economic changes have also resulted in reduced funding for education. Distance education institutions are usually chronically short of resources and often work with outmoded information systems, too few staff with too little training, inadequate infrastructure to support operations, and crowded buildings.

The environment is increasingly competitive. Even traditional institutions that once questioned the validity of distance education have recognized the demand for alternative modes of study and

have begun to adopt distance delivery methods for some of their courses and programs. Many institutions that have specialized in distance teaching in a wide-open market suddenly find themselves in a position of scrambling to meet enrolment targets to ensure their funding base. Hence, distance and open learning institutions find themselves under pressure to meet incredibly unrealistic expectations to serve an ever-widening set of needs with scarce resources and little infrastructure in a highly competitive environment. In this context, where finding and responding to new markets and speed of production have become key issues, it is sometimes difficult to focus on promoting learner success. However, if open distance learning is to play a key role in the training and education of society, there is a responsibility to provide more than mere access to mass-produced knowledge. This challenge relates back to the issue of institutional culture, and the importance of having a well-defined and integrated approach to learner services based on clearly articulated guiding values about learners and how the learning process is best facilitated.

Development of a Learner Service Model-An Illustration

A model of learner services that is theory-based and firmly rooted in a clearly articulated set of values facilitates planning and resource allocation, and it acknowledges the importance placed on responsiveness to learners within the institution. It also provides a framework within which to evaluate current services and consider new ones. Of course, the development of a service model does not take place in a vacuum. There are many factors other than an institutional value system and a theoretical rationale that contribute to the choice of a particular range of services and delivery methods within a given institution.

Learner services should take into consideration the unique and changing needs of the students being served and the institutional context, and should be revised as appropriate to accommodate changes in student population, the institution, and the environment. Only in this way can an institution be truly responsive to its clientele. For example, the need to initiate new academic programs may require temporary reallocation of resources from service areas to an academic department. Lack of trained staff may temporarily constrain an institution's ability to offer certain services. Serving corporate clients may entail providing services at the workplace. However, having an articulated conceptual model that starts from the institutional value system and a strong theory base (e.g., why students persist or drop out; what contributes to independent learning and student empowerment) will provide some stability in priority setting and accommodating needed changes in a planned way.

The remainder of this section illustrates how values and research findings can be brought together to develop a service model based upon a testable epistemology. Values and beliefs determine how research findings are interpreted in order to reach conclusions about student needs, and in turn, how hypotheses are developed regarding required services.

The values and principles upon which the rationale for learner services presented in this chapter are based are presented below. They represent a constructivist and learner-centred approach to education. Although it is argued herein that this approach facilitates institutional responsiveness to its clientele, it is recognized that the model presented may not be appropriate for all contexts. For this reason, it is important to make explicit the specific values on which it is based.

- Education is a continuous, lifelong process.

- Most people can succeed in education, given the opportunity and the support to do so.

- The goal of formal learning systems is to assist individuals to become both independent and collaborative learners who can increasingly take responsibility for what they learn and how they learn.

- The teaching-learning process is interactive, not one-way, and facilitates change and self-action.

- Accessibility means going beyond merely providing opportunities.

- Inherent in the commitment to open access is the following:

- an openness to different ways of learning and teaching to suit different needs and situations, and

- a responsibility to provide services for learners that give them the best opportunity for success.

The brevity of this chapter precludes a more comprehensive consideration of the rich variety of research findings regarding learners in distance education. The following are some basic conclusions about distance education student characteristics and behaviours that have been confirmed by a variety of studies and which are directly relevant to the development of learner services.

- Students' personal situations alone cannot account for attrition. Persisters experience just as potentially disruptive life events (a death in the family, a job change, an illness, a geographical move) as those who drop out. A decision to drop out usually involves a complex interplay of factors, one of which is support received from the institution (Brindley, 1987; Sweet, 1986).

- Students are individuals who come to their studies with a variety of personal characteristics that contribute to their behaviour in courses and to some extent determine their support needs. These include their abilities, learning styles, gender, culture, academic preparedness, personal support systems, and expectations (Coldeway, 1986; Powell, Conway, & Ross, 1990).

- Some students complete a course no matter what the circumstances (no support, administrative mistakes, long delays), and some students drop out no matter what the circumstances (good support services, well-designed courses, fast turnaround times). There is probably not much an institution can do to change these behaviours. The majority of students fall between these two extremes, and it is for this group that support services may make a difference (Powell, Conway, & Ross, 1990).

- Students often enter distance education programs because they perceive them to be an easier way to get credentials. Many are shocked at the difficulty of studying independently. This is probably related to the way in which the unique features of distance education-accessibility, flexibility, and independence for the learner-are emphasized in promotion and marketing, to the exclusion of the harsher realities. (Brindley, 1987; Pandey in Scriven, Lundin, & Ryan, 1992).

- When students drop out, they usually do so early on, either never starting or doing very little in their course before disappearing (Coldeway & Spencer, 1980; Holmberg, 1989; Rekkedal, 1982, Shale, 1982).

- Students who complete a first assignment are much more likely to complete the whole course, and students who complete one course successfully are much more likely to be successful in a subsequent course (Coldeway, 1986).

- Students often enter distance learning programs, particularly if there is an open admissions policy, with inadequate levels of preparedness. They not only have insufficient knowledge of and a lack of skills to cope with the special rigours and requirements of independent study, but they have also not assessed their own needs, educational goals, academic preparedness, learning style, or personal support systems (Powell, Conway, & Ross, 1990).

- Students begin their studies with expectations that relate to their past experiences-if they have had negative experiences with education in the past (and many of them have), they expect the same from this experience. Powell, Conway, and Ross (1990) concluded that expectations based on past experience of education were more important than past level of education achieved.

- When students drop out of a distance education course or program, they usually blame themselves rather than the institution or circumstances. Unlike their campus-based counterparts, they usually have no one with whom to check their perceptions (Paul, 1986).

- Distance students are often isolated, not necessarily geographically, but as individual learners. Often they know no other students, and their friends, family, and employers may not be very understanding or sympathetic about the challenges they face with their studies. This is particularly the case for women (Kirkup & von Prummer, 1990).

Within the context of the values statements presented earlier, conclusions that can been drawn about learner needs from these research findings might assume that the general goals of learner services are as follows: (1) development of independent learners; (2) student empowerment, (3) personalization of the learning system; (4) democratization of the system; (5) early engagement of students and facilitation of connectedness.

These goals can be expanded upon, taking into consideration what is known about student behaviour, and used to guide the development of support services for distance learners. Examples of services that can be developed to contribute to each goal are provided below. Although the term "institution" is used throughout, these can be applied in any private or public organizations using distance education.

Development of Independent Learners

Make the development of independent learners an explicit institutional goal so that it becomes part of all operations and is used as one measure of success. An independent learner is defined here as someone who takes responsibility for his or her own learning and is instrumental and active in the learning process. 'Ibis is probably the most challenging initiative because it is at the

heart of what an institution is about-the way in which it teaches and interacts with learners. If an institution is going to embrace this principle, it will have to build an institutional climate and culture where it is the norm to build strategies for developing independent learners into all academic programs and services. For this reason, it may require the following:

- A review of the institutional mission statement, strategic plan, and departmental operational plans to ensure that there is a consistent rationale for activities.

- A review of existing, or the development of new, models of learner services to articulate clearly the role of services (and the role of such staff as tutors, counsellors, telephone receptionists, and librarians) and how each contributes to the encouragement of independent learning. For example, library services can promote the development of library research skills, and career counselling can teach career development skills.

Student Empowerment

Empower students so that instead of quietly going away they can actively participate in their education and communicate with the institution about how to do a better job to serve them.

- Develop information and orientation programs that ensure prospective students have the information they need in order to make decisions about enrolment and course choices. This process includes evaluating themselves as well as the institution. Students need access to services that enable them to gauge not only traditional academic readiness (e.g., mathematics, reading, and writing) but also their readiness as it pertains to distance study-time available for studying, availability of personal support systems, and so on.

- Set minimum service and teaching standards that define what every student can expect, and publicize these. At the Open University in the United Kingdom, every student will soon receive a students' charter of rights upon enrolment. (See The Open University Student Charter, A Draft Proposal for Consultation [19941.) Other institutions are following the UKOU's lead.

- Build meaningfulness into course design by recognizing the relevance of students' experiences and ideas -

- Experiment with learning contracts (in which curriculum and assessment methods are negotiated with students). Empire State College provides some good models to follow.

- Emphasize the process as well as the content of learning (Thorpe, 1994).

- Facilitate activities where students can share their experiences with one another and challenge and validate each others' ideas and opinions.

Personalization of the Learning System

Personalize the system so that it does not isolate students. Independence should not translate as isolation.

- Have someone whom students can call when they have administrative difficulties or when they need information; do not make it difficult for students to make contact with the institution.

- Review policies and regulations regularly to ensure that they make sense, and be prepared to make exceptions to rules to accommodate the complicated lives of adult students. Consult with students and with staff who have regular contact with students (O'Rourke, 1993).

- Recognize the effect on student motivation of inconsistencies in service, slow turnaround times, and administrative red tape and mistakes; implement service standards that can be met at least 95 percent of the time.

- Assign a study partner to new students, publish a student directory.

- Send out introductory messages from tutors with a photograph, and/or audio- or videocassettes.

Democratization of the System

Democratize the system so that it not only encourages people of various backgrounds to participate but as much as possible provides everyone with an equal chance of success regardless of learning style, gender, academic preparedness, or other characteristics. Do not design courses and services that assume that everyone has the same needs and abilities.

- Help students to assess their needs. Self-assessment materials for learning styles, level of study skills, writing, mathematics, and reading have been developed for use with distance learners. (Athabasca University has some good sample materials.)

- Offer opportunities for students to inform themselves, make better decisions, and improve their skills. Strive to offer (or provide access through information and referral) the same support systems and opportunities that campus-based students usually have: career, personal, and academic counselling; library services and training; prior-learning assessment; interest and ability testing; financial aid; and services for students with disabilities and other special needs. All these services are intended to help students succeed academically; context and resource levels will determine which are most necessary and viable.

- Publicize all services well so that students can gain access to them easily.

- Continually evaluate services to ensure that resources are being used where they are most needed by students.

Early Engagement and Connectedness

Engage students early on and facilitate connectedness with the institution, with other students, with their families, and with others who can support them in their studies. View the need and desire for interaction not as a deficit but rather as part of a positive and assertive approach to learning.

- Invest in services that have an impact on prospective and beginning students.

- Help prospective students to make informed decisions about their education. For. example, maintain a good information and referral system so that they can find out about choices available to them.

- Ensure that students receive an orientation that informs them about the special challenges of independent learning and provides them with strategies for success.

- Ensure that students know whom to contact for help.

- Build early contact with the tutor into course design so that students speak to someone within the first two to three weeks of enrolment. Train tutors; research shows that learners' impressions of the first contact are important to their persistence (Brindley, 1987; Burge, Howard, & Ironside, 1991).

- Use a variety of methods to facilitate connectedness: newsletters, communication through technology (such as computer- and audioconferencing), self-help materials about how to start and use a study group, or how to engage the help of family. The institution cannot provide everything, but it can facilitate connectedness with other support systems, especially other students.

The intention of this section has been to give concrete illustrations of how services can be developed in a systematic and integrated way based on values and research findings. The particular value system, and other variables that determine the choice of learner services to be offered, will be determined by context. A workplace training service may make some different choices than a distance teaching university. However, if distance education practitioners wish to be responsive to their clientele, a consistent and purposeful approach to learner services will obviously be more effective than a piecemeal system that changes each year based primarily on economic considerations. In tough economic times, it is all too easy to pay less attention to the more complex aspects of the intellectual, emotional, and self-management processes in learning.

Analysis

Many factors are transforming open distance education: a better developed research and theoretical base, technological innovations, vast economic changes on a global scale, and increased pressure for access to educational opportunities. It is encouraging that the tone of the literature of open distance learning has changed from a defensive stance to one that reflects the confidence and pride of practitioners-not just in opening access to educational opportunities, but

in the quality of educational experience that is being provided. In great part, this confidence comes from better knowledge of the field. More is known about learner characteristics and behaviour, and how to promote learning, including quality in course design and production, use of technologies to facilitate interaction, and the provision of effective services.

However, it is important to note that at the same time that open distance learning is being "adopted as a mainstream method of education and training" (Tait, in press), and progress is being made toward critically analyzing practice and developing better theoretical frameworks, there are other, possibly negative forces affecting developments in open and distance learning in the public and private sectors. The factor that appears to have had the most impact on the development of learner services in open distance learning is the economic recession and the subsequent reduction in funding that every educational institution in Canada and elsewhere has had to face in the past few years.

Most educational institutions in Canada have had to make reductions in all areas of operation; however, there is concern that learner services have taken the brunt of the cost-cutting measures (Paul, 1988; Brindley & Fage, 1992). Some examples of the cuts to service made by many distance education institutions are the replacement of tenured instructional staff with less qualified contract tutors, the severe reduction or elimination of services such as counselling, the retrenchment of staff development, and reductions in funding for applied research and evaluation of practice.

Such decisions, while they may be necessary in some circumstances, appear to fly in the face of developing a more responsive learner-centred model of practice. There is a danger that in meeting the demand, particularly from governments, to reduce costs while responding to the need for access and economies of scale in educating and training the workforce, open distance learning could be turned away from its goals of developing independent, self-responsible learners and return to a more industrial model of education.

There are encouraging indications that this will not happen in any sweeping way: the shifts and developments in practice are apparent from the ways in which distance education is being conceptualized in the recent literature. There is a movement away from a descriptive approach that focusses on the similarities and differences between open distance learning and campus-based learning, to a more analytical approach that attempts to define and question the epistemologies upon which practice is based. This is partly due to the availability of a greater body of research, and the paradigm shift from an expository teaching model to a more experiential, constructivist model. With regard to learner services, this latter shift is reflected in a move from a defensive, piecemeal approach that responds to learner deficits to a more proactive and holistic approach that attends to the individual learner's experience and how it can be enhanced.

These new ways of envisioning distance education practice can provide an advantage in an environment that demands flexibility and speed of response. In particular, a flexible and responsible learner services system can play a key role in keeping an institution or program competitive. Sewart (1993) discusses the marketplace advantages of the move from viewing distance learning as an industrial endeavour to a service endeavour, and stresses the role of learner support in making this shift. However, the danger is that under pressure, old paradigms will prevail. Lentell (1994) argues, based on her experience in the U.K. Open University, that tutoring, rather than being seen as part of a learner-focussed model, can become part of an industrial production-line approach by institutions eager to "process" as many students as possible and gain the financial benefits of economy of scale:

Indeed teaching is frequently minimized to marking-since the materials are deemed to stand alone, and students to be, if not independent, striving to become independent. In this model, students need a welter of educational counselling service - educational guidance, career guidance, study skills help, exam guidance and so forth-which are offered them as generic, not course related services The model of 'teaching' has radically changed. (p. 2)

The challenge for open distance learning is to find ways to become more responsive to changes, particularly changes in market demands, while staying congruent with a strong value system that places the focus on providing quality learning experiences. Using their specialized knowledge base regarding learning and learning systems, distance education institutions and agencies can become more competitive in the educational marketplace. A number of open distance learning institutions are moving from more inflexible models of print7based, packaged learning to more responsive, entrepreneurial models that provide rapid and effective response to learner needs. Learner services can play a key role in making this move.

Conclusions

Learner services are defined by context. Whether services are offered at a distance or face-to-face on a traditional campus, at a technical college or a university, for children or adults, they exist to "support the academic mission of the school' (Lyons, 1990, p. 25). However, interpreted in its broadest sense, this purpose opens the door to a wide variety of possibilities for learner services, particularly in looking at the role that services can play in helping an institution or agency to transform its academic mission in becoming more responsive to its learners and its changing environment.
Institutions that want to become more competitive in the educational marketplace must reposition themselves to be service oriented and consumer driven. In distance education, this means giving up old ways of conceptualizing practice as dissemination of knowledge. Although many institutions have worked toward the goal of higher completion rates, it is probably fair to say that most institutions engaged in distance teaching are still losing more students than they would like. For too many years, learners have complained about such problems as long delays waiting for packages, bureaucratic red tape which causes confusion and frustration, and difficulties in receiving service that might give them access to appropriate learning opportunities (Canadian Association for Distance Education, 1993).
Individual learners and other clients who choose open distance learning as a mode of study should be able to do so because it is an attractive option that offers a high-quality educational experience. Strong arguments can and have been made that the provision of the same or better services for distance students as campus-based students is unrealistic because of the cost factor. However, embedded in these arguments is an assumption that these services are "add-ons" which distance learners either do not deserve or can do without. In a model where responsiveness to learners is a central value, these are not add-ons any more than they are for campus-based students-they are central to the business of the institution.
An institution that has the ability to respond quickly and effectively to its clientele will have the edge in what has become a very competitive market. No matter how perfectly a course package is prepared, most learners are not interested in waiting a long time to receive it unless they have no alternative. Most clients expect to receive quick response to their requests and to engage in

interaction with the institution that will facilitate their success. An institution with a well-developed, flexible model of learner services will be in the best position to respond to these needs.

Following are some examples of institutions and agencies using learner services to respond effectively to their changing clientele:

- Paced learning in the workplace. Learner services such as on-site registration, orientation, academic advising, and tutoring can make open distance learning a very attractive staff development option for corporate clients.

- Custom-designed services for groups. Open distance learning institutions can respond to the needs of special groups such as First Nations people by offering courses in Native-friendly environments such as the -local band council office. A custom-designed, culturally sensitive service package might include on-site academic preparation assessment, orientation and study skills help, academic advising and counselling, and tutoring.

- Academic preparation assessment for new clientele. Economic restructuring has resulted in a demand for learning opportunities for a broad variety of new clientele, many of whom have been employed for many years in work areas that no longer exist. They can be helped by assessing their readiness for study and diagnosing possible learning difficulties' (which may have driven them into the job market before they completed their secondary education). Open systems, because they have been serving adult clientele for many years, should be strategically positioned to serve this group.

- Use of technology to connect learners to learning resources. New technologies allow librarians to focus on developing access to materials worldwide, interpreting the information, and finding ways to navigate through the networks, rather than buying materials for their own library. Open distance learning appears to be taking advantage of these opportunities more quickly than campus-based institutions, and should be able to offer learners better access to materials. In 1993, the Canadian Library Association issued formal guidelines for the provision of distance learning services, and the distance education literature includes more articles than ever before on library services.

These are just a few examples of the ways in which institutions can provide quick and effective responses to learner needs.

The focus for most competitive businesses has shifted from products to service. For example, the Total Quality Management movement which has had a sweeping effect on business across North America represents an attempt by some companies to implement long-term fundamental change toward a customer-driven approach to business. Many institutions and agencies produce course packages, but few are poised to serve learners as well as those institutions who have already struggled for years with the complexities of open distance learning. If they can resist the pressure to return to an industrial model of operation, and continue to work toward the goal of developing independent learners by offering responsive and innovative learning opportunities, open distance learning institutions will be well positioned to meet the challenges of the new marketplace.

Endnotes

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