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A PIECE OF THE JIGSAW: STUDENT ADVISING IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

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One of the less visible components of distance education, the one nebulously termed "student support" can drift out of awareness and to the bottom of priorities, especially in the face of funding cuts and the drive for efficiency. While it is understandable that the most visible component, the course package, may be valued as the most tangible, presentable and reviewable aspect, suited to demonstrating quality to the sceptics, this emphasis can overshadow the human interactions that are less easily documented or measured, but are equally important for student satisfaction and success. The course package is just one piece of the complex jigsaw that forms an educational experience. As distance education moves to a new phase of more general acceptance and widespread use and as it explores newer technologies, it is important to ensure recognition and continuation of the valuable, but often invisible interactions between students and a supportive representative of an educational institution.

Student support generally includes a range of activities; tutoring, marking assignments and exams, academic and personal counselling, and student advising. Student advising is used here to describe activities that help students find their way when dealing with academic and administrative issues and balancing priorities among studies, life, family and work responsibilities.

Student advising may be carried out by people in a variety of roles; registration staff, academic advisors, distance education instructors, counsellors. It is often fitted in as one of many responsibilities, with little or no provision in workload allocation and often without funding for long distance Telephone or postage. Yet those who provide these services are committed to helping students find their way through the institutional maze and over educational and personal hurdles, as they start out with uncertain directions and move towards a goal that becomes more defined over time.

The reflections by two women who have included student advising among their multiple roles capture something of the texture of student advising. They have more than fifty years' collective experience in distance education, as students, instructors and advisors. Their thoughts also relay a distillation of the experience of hundreds of students for whom they have been advisors and advocates.

Introducing the advisors

Professor Sally Haag has taught classical studies at the University of Waterloo for over 30 years: more than 20 years ago she was one of the first in the Faculty of Arts to take on the challenging task of preparing and teaching distance education courses. During the next few years, more of her colleagues in the classical studies department took on distance teaching, because as she says, "Classics had always been in the forefront, finding and leaping into new opportunities, as a result of living on the professional precipice". As more courses became available, increasing numbers of distance students began to concentrate on classical studies, and they needed advice about planning their program for a major and later, an honours degree. As well, while Waterloo's distance education program expanded exponentially, more and more faculty were seeking advice about how to go about the task of transforming their classroom teaching into a course package.

These developments led to two additional roles. From the outset, Sally served as advisor to all distance students in the classical studies department, and for eight years she was also distance teaching advisor in

the university's instructional development office. This latter role entailed assisting faculty who taught distance education courses, through individual sessions, workshops, a quarterly newsletter and two handbooks, one for course authors and one for course tutors. As well, she has authored and taught over a dozen distance education courses, and continued teaching three or four courses a term. In 1993, Sally received the university's Distinguished Teaching Award and was especially cited for her work with distance students. Having completed some of her primary education as a distance student, Sally continues to take distance education courses for her own enjoyment.

Dr. Monique Layton, a program director at Simon Fraser University's Centre for Distance Education since 1989, was not only a distance student herself, but her father, while living in Morocco during the 1930's, completed an entire civil engineering program offered by L'Ecole de Travaux Publiques in Paris. Monique herself began taking distance courses while living in Kamloops with her husband and "four and a half' children. During summers, she studied on campus, "one summer I was pregnant, the next summer I was breastfeeding", and after completing her bachelor's degree, went on to complete two master's degrees and a doctorate in anthropology. She describes herself as "an absolute devotee of distance education".

Monique worked with the Universities Council, which coordinated budgets and programs for post secondary distance education in British Columbia. In that role, she prepared a report on access to university education in non-metropolitan areas of British Columbia, a 95,000 hectare province where mountain ranges, remote coastlines and a northern climate can present formidable barriers to transportation and communication. The report included a case study of one community demonstrating the impact of lack of access to complete university programs, one factor which led to the establishment of a coordinated distance education system for B.C. Monique subsequently coordinated an Open Learning Agency project in "enhanced delivery", which supplemented distance education courses with weekly face to face instruction. At Simon Fraser, her role as program director in the Centre for Distance Education included working with course authors and providing advice and support for students enrolled in distance programs in criminology. For four years, Monique was also co-editor of the Journal of Distance Education, published by the Canadian Association for Distance Education and Simon Fraser University.

Here are some reflections from Sally and Monique on issues related to student advising.

How they regard their role

For Sally, advising can be regarded as one component of teaching in the broadest sense, and includes academic tutoring, academic advising, and practical help for students whose personal circumstances require appealing to various regulatory provisions for special consideration.

There's various aspects to advising. There's academic stuff, that you do in connection with the course. A student writes and says, "I cannot understand how contracted verbs work. " And you write back and say, "well have a look at such and such, another text, and you'll see that they display it differently, and look at my notes and you'11 see how, and so on. " That's strictly academic tutoring.

And then there's the sort when they ask you, "What course should I take next?" or "Do you think it's sensible to do both Greek History and Roman History at the same time?" And you write back and say, "Well, these are the pros and cons."

And then there's the sort that says, " My elderly mother just broke her hip and what am I going to do and I'm going to have to drop out of the course." Usually, I take a personal response, and say, "I know all about that, that happened to me too, and I guess the best thing for you to do is probably this or this or this. I can arrange the technical side, give you an 'incomplete', or postpone the exam. " There's the sort of

practical side of how to cut through the red tape, and then there's the sort of motivational or encouraging side. And all of that goes along with the job of teaching a course. Anything can arise at any time.

Monique tailored her role to a particular context and to the practical demands as they emerged.

At OLA, I became aware of the various types of support you could give to students, and how well received they were, or were not... When I came (to SFU) at first, 1 didn't have an office; I had boxes for six weeks. So I was in the tutor marker's office. But it gave me time to think a little bit, to read a little bit about what had to be done, and mostly to become aware of how important the tutor markers were, because I could hear them talking to students, and I tried to reconstruct the other side of the conversation.

Monique continued her interest in the tutor-student relationship, but her own role of advising students developed in response to another need that emerged. In B.C., component courses in the criminology program are offered by several institutions and students often need help in dealing with the complex array of prerequisites and requirements for transfer credit in order to reach their desired accreditation.

... Most of the time, I was the first person to respond. maybe not the first person they had contacted, because they would go here and there, and finally they would come to me. But I had the answers and I probably had the right answers, but at least I had consistent answers. At one point, I discovered that students (from another institution) had been allowed to go on taking courses until such time as they couldn't transfer here (to SFU) any more. It was not the fault of the other institution, simply that students didn't ask questions. So they had a whole bag of courses- either they could drop a whole year's worth of study, and come back to us, because of a bureaucratic requirement (that students complete a minimum number of courses in the university from which they intend to graduate). They didn't realize- they thought they were taking a B.A. in criminology at SFU through the other institution.

At that time I decided I was going to do the advising for anybody who was taking criminology courses (at any of the institutions). So we had very good discussion with all the advisors, and announced that we were taking back (advising about criminology programs), They were relieved.

What Students Need: Contact, Clarity, Advocacy, A Pilot

Both Sally and Monique feel that a bit of contact can go a long way, for a distance student, especially if the response is timely and considered. They also recognise that some distance students maintain their distance by choice.

CONTACT

Students are always incredibly touched when they say, "I am Elizabeth Smith, and I'm a student..... and I say, " Oh, Elizabeth you don't have to tell me who you are, I know who you are.. " They can't believe it. It's really just because names stick in my mind easily off class lists, and I remember their work, I remember them on paper. When they phone me up, I do know who they are in that limited sense.

... I do ask them to send me a little bio sheet, and they get one from me, but it's a very bare item. But out of little scraps of information, it's not like I have a picture in my mind, but I just know a number of things about that person. It's like part of a jigsaw puzzle, and every little piece that comes in my direction I will plug in to the puzzle. I don't think of doing that deliberately, that's just the way it goes. And when you actually meet the person, you get more pieces for the puzzle.

A lot of distance students choose to be distance students. They prefer it, they're the closet students. Sometimes some of them will emerge very tentatively, and discover that there really is somebody at this end, somebody who is interested in them, in that limited sense, someone to whom they can send a small joke at the end of their essay and get a similar item back again. A human interaction on a small scale. Then they get braver, and actually appear here, sometimes, or they call. You can see them emerging, developing confidence that this is not just a great threatening institution.

Monique's advising was not in the context of a direct teaching role, but she provided guidance to students who needed information, reassurance and a voice of experience, They would ask... how many courses should they take. So I would immediately ask whether they were working full time, half time, whether they had a family, and I explained they didn't want to make life miserable for everybody around them and for themselves. Because nothing would be worse than not doing well in a course--- people become discouraged, that's not desirable. And I try usually to tone down their ambitions, try one, maybe two courses and see what happens. It's only four months, 13 weeks, so you haven't really wasted that much time if you find that you can handle more. See, in Criminology we dock students 10% of their grade for each day that they are late with their assignments. So again, that's one thing I had to warn them about.

And mostly I think it should be an enjoyable experience for them. And you know, you can feel them relaxing when they realize that they're talking to someone who knows what it's like to have that experience. Some people were saying, "I'm quite old, I'm in my forties," and I say, "Well I went back to school when I had five children and I was in my forties, and it was great fun. It was difficult, but it certainly was worth it. " After you have actually talked to them, you understand what they want and tell them to enjoy the course, to have a good time doing it. It's better than having a button pushed giving them exactly the same message. You could have a greeter-really I was a greeter- that's what I was.

CLARITY

The problem-solving role included in student advising operates at a number of different levels, reviewing requirements, sorting out detailed academic regulations, and helping address the myriad situations that arise for adult students with multiple demands on their lives. Sally describes various types of responses and interventions she will undertake on behalf of students. There are over 200 distance students taking a classical studies course in any given term: anyone who asks about taking more courses in the department receives a prompt response.

If they show any kind of interest, even of a tentative sort, like asking me which course to take next, I never miss a chance to send them the information sheets. I'll send you all this stuff right away and you can get back to me. I don't think I'm too pushy, but I like to make sure they have all the information. I have a whole set of information sheets and check sheets; I'll tell them which courses they still have to do and all the rest of it. And I send them a check sheet with a note saying these are the things I send to all the majors every term.

For the cohort of about 50 students majoring in classical studies, and over a dozen honours students, academic requirements tend to become more complex as students progress through the program.

After the grade reports come out, I send out these check sheets, which have two columns, one of which says, "you have these courses" and "you still need these courses". And they like that. Then I'll write them a letter on the back if I have anything additional to say. I hardly ever type anything, which is very eccentric, but I think it helps- I think they like to think there's this strange eccentric person at the other end who still pushes pens. I do make a copy, and I keep all their files right beside my desk, so that the moment they phone I can say, just hold on a minute and I'H get your file, because the majors do call fairly

often. Once or twice a year I hear from at least half of them, and they say, what I am going to do on this or that, and then I can pull out the file fast, because they're calling long distance.

It's pretty complicated to become an honours student. At the senior level, they work much more independently. All those honour students I know personally. Most of them have visited here at some point. Someone in the department certainly knows them quite well, has taught them several times, has written letters back and forth. I can tell you quite a bit about most of them.

Most of them become majors probably in their first two or three years of becoming a distance student. Honours, another three or four or five year after that. Our honours students probably have student i.d.'s of between 7 and 12 years ago, because they're very busy people, and very few people will do more than 2 courses at once, and senior courses, just the one. But interestingly, quite a lot of those honours students, maybe 25% or so, have been on campus, and have come here one night a week. But the senior thesis work is heavy going for them. I'm just watching them starting on it now.

Monique as well, has developed print information packages for each distance course in the criminology program. When students call with an inquiry, the response is tailored to the students' requirements.

There were a lot of nitty gritty types of things I would advise them on ... If they want information, they get information. I am willing to listen and probe a little bit to find out their personal circumstances as it relates to the amount of work they would be comfortable doing. Lately in the last year or so one of my jobs has been to tell them it was going to be difficult for them to take the courses they wanted, when they had the option, maybe they should take a course in another discipline, to make sure that they had the prerequisites, and saying that it would enrich their program. There was not enough space (in the criminology courses).When they couldn't get the courses they wanted, ... I would say, it's really right what you would like to take, but take whatever you can.

AN ADVOCATE

For any of the department's distance students, Sally will undertake an advocacy role:

... when something goes wrong, that's usually when I will intervene. I'm always phoning over (to the distance education office) to say, I need an incomplete for so and so, or this person has to have the exam put off until the end of the summer. When they get in a mess over something, a problem in their personal life or some other department's course they're talking and they can't get what they want out of the instructor there or whatever, I will try then to intervene and find out what the solution is, whatever's possible. I don't do too much of that, but I do it fairly regularly. I would do it for any student that asked me. But I conscientiously and consciously do it for classics majors. So yes, you help to push them through the system as securely as you can. For things like medical problems or family problems, you have to make the system bend to accommodate the student. It's amazing how far the system can bend. All it takes is somebody like me. I look after about 50 people; thankfully nearly all of them don't want anything most of the time. At any moment if something emerges 1 can appeal to have grades removed, 1 can postpone completion of courses, I can do all kinds of things. And I'm reasonably good at all the regulations--- not brilliant, but reasonably good.

If a student-tutor problem seemed intractable, Monique would do what she could:

..If they can't approach the tutor marker because they hate them.... in a case like that 1 either tell them who the right person is to talk to, or if they have a complaint to write it to me, and I will talk to the course supervisor myself.

Sally also defines types of support that are beyond her field, particularly personal and career counselling:

... I get more nervous about what I would call the counselling end of things, but 1 feel you can probably not do any harm by listening, so I will listen. If it seems as though there's some real problem, I say things like, maybe the counselling services here can do something if you can get in here. I don't very often have to deal with that, but sometimes-- well just like you would with any friend, you don't leave them, but at a certain point you push them off in the direction of professional counselling. And I never have anything to do with career counselling.

A PILOT

By contrast many students Monique dealt with had an ultimate career goal in mind, but were not always clear about how to get there.

For instance, we have a number of people in the RCNT, military police and people who want to apply to the regular city police force. They want one or two years and they recommend our program so that's fairly straightforward. Also you have people who want to take a certain program because they want to upgrade their marks in order to get into the master's program. So that's perfectly straightforward.

But I make it clear, it's an academic program, it's not a professional program, warning them that there was no guarantee of a job. If they had an idea about where they'd like to work, I'd say, try to find out who are the people who do the hiring, in that particular department, agency, if you can, get to talk to them bring in the program outline with you, see whether that type of training would be useful. Because you don't want to waste money, time and energy and find after two years of study you have not progressed in the right direction.

Students seem to be lost in a maze of possibilities that they don't always understand. We have a wonderful system in B.C providing you know how to get from here to there. We have so many back alleys and back ways, entrances to programs, but unless you really know how it works ... you really have to be willing to take them a little bit by the hand and lead them. And you want to make sure that they don't take the wrong turn and waste time and money and energy. I think so much energy is involved in distance ed, it would be really sad if they lost that fire, maybe through some silly mistake that somebody else made on their behalf. So I always felt like a little tugboat or a pilot boat, leading people into the harbour. You really have to know your seas very well to guide them, then you deliver them, and that's where the program starts. Because so much is at stake, and we forget, from our comfortable jobs and desks, how much is at stake for students.

What difference does it make?

Sally describes how contact with students makes a difference:

You can turn people off as fast as you can turn people on. It seems to me that all teachers have as their prime responsibility to find that curiosity in students, to develop the kind of tools that they need to serve that curiosity, and to feel better about themselves. To be better people. I'm very moral, goodness me. I shouldn't say things like --- you think you're around here to help people be better. Some philosopher will stick his head around the door and say, "what is better?"

I think I do feel moral about it. I do feel I have a responsibility to try to model the kind of qualities that scholarship represents in the wider human context. Scholarship represents thoroughness and integrity and

absolute honesty, and a whole lot of things. We serve them up as scholarly activity, but they are actually just a particular window on the human personality. And the values of good scholarship are just the values of a good human personality, in my opinion. You don't lie, you face truth, you do it thoroughly, that kind of thing.

Students indicate to Monique their response to: finding a helpful advisor:

Students would pay for that phone call, during the day, sometimes from Nova Scotia, (5000 km away) spend five minutes with me, so obviously they felt they needed to. Most of the time, they were people who genuinely did not understand what they were supposed to do. They knew they wanted to be talking courses, and maybe they knew what they wanted to do with the program once they completed it, but they didn't know how to get started. There's a genuine need, why would they phone you otherwise--- they really want to know something. When a student asks a question, hesitantly, and I say, yes, I'm the right person, you hear a sigh of relief, especially if they' ve been bounced from person to person.

Sally also emphasizes the value of human contact, especially when in a field in which technology plays a part and isolation is always a risk: It seems to me that the absolute basis for human beings is interaction. I find all this e-mail business rather scary, because I think computers enable people to evade direct interaction. I think it's a very bad business if we forget how to interact with others, and 1 think computers are contributing to that. People interact with the computer instead of with other people. 1 don't like the thought of people being perfectly happy learning whatever it is they want to learn off the computer or out of books. They should be interacting with someone. A lot of the valuable lessons go on a level of one human being to another- the most valuable ones.

And if you lose that, and for a lot of us, it's only too easy to lose it because we don't actually take to it like ducks to water, then you get the sort of nerds who just live more and more with their computers, or bookworms who live more and more with their books, because they can't actually remember how to interact with other human beings. And that's a bad tendency 1 would say. So it's bad news if people are given packages of information or material and they really glom on to them and get further and further away from other people. I think it's dangerous to take the personal element out of it. We've got enough of it as it is. The world is filled with ciphers and alienated persons.

For Monique, contact with students reminds us that the course cannot be regarded as just a package:

It's very theoretical when you prepare a course, and you say, those questions should be asked at this point in the course. But when you actually hear the students, you realize that they want a friendly guide. I would hate for students to become discouraged, take a course and find they can't keep up or have constant anxiety about keeping up, and it also destroys their personal life..... I feel protective towards them.

If you're going to cut back student support, then you have to start thinking very seriously about whether you want to be in the business. Because all you're providing then is a guide, and you could become a totally self directed studies institution. It could become what my father had, which is fine for some people, but it requires determination. I don't think we're going to survive if we can't give students the right type of support. You need to have somebody at the end of the line who knows the answer, because you are going to get a lot of questions.

In summarising types of activities encompassed by the term "student support", Sally stresses the value of each of them:

It seems there are three things that I do. One is the academic, absolutely. It is a matter of interest in the Latin relative pronoun. Learning detailed, difficult, interesting stuff. The second is the sort of moral side;

helping people learn to be better people, in the sense that they can do with greater self confidence and greater adherence to principles of integrity in what they want to do. And the third thing is sort of motivational, the business of keeping them at it, because it's so easy to become discouraged and despair and give up and get bored. And you only need a little bit of a push now and then and the push comes from knowing there's someone out there wondering what you're up to. The eloquence of Sally and Monique clearly conveys the stuff and substance of what is entailed in student support, and why it is so important to maintain and to recognize as an essential component of all education, particularly distance education. Their experience holds an important message as new interactive technologies emerge and as distance education is regarded by some as cost-effective packaged learning for which student support is a merely an optional luxury.

The analogy of the jigsaw, although it emerged in another context, seemed appropriate as a description of what a distance learning experience should be: no one piece is more important than the others, but if any piece is missing, the picture is incomplete. Support provided by student advisors, tutors and counsellors is one such piece.

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