Chapter XXXV
Access Barriers Experienced by Adults in Distance Education Courses and Programs

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of distance education components to courses and entire programs at institutes of higher education have been the focus of discussion within the last decade. Educational constituents have sought to explore the implications of distance education practices on teaching and learning. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the literature on barriers to access, particularly for adult learners, in distance education programs and courses. Prior to discussing access barriers, a brief history of distance education is articulated. Further, strategies that individuals or institutions utilize to overcome these barriers are presented. Concluding the chapter are trends and issues shaping the future landscape of distance education.

INTRODUCTION

The use of distance education in the United States continues to grow. Recent studies have documented the increased use of distance education in a multitude of academic and technical disciplines in postsecondary institutions. Many institutes of higher education offer entire degree programs online and, whether they like it or not, more and more faculty are being required to integrate online components into their courses (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). Private industry and business, along with governmental agencies, have also recognized the value that the "any time and any place" phenomenon distance education

provides for educational and training opportunities to employees in organizations.

Despite the removal of time and place constraints in comparison to a traditional classroom for adult learners, distance education can present a new set of constraints, or barriers, to accessing educational opportunities. These barriers can be significant for adult learners, many of whom are "non-traditional" students, i.e., older, employed, in pursuit of job skill updates, seeking career transitions, or returning to college after a long absence. Further, these students may be single parents or transfer students, who, because of family responsibilities, work commitments, or geographic limitations, are seeking to access educational opportunities that imposes little impediments to their life challenges. Thus, distance education offers the promise of unfettered access for these individuals. But, has the promise been fulfilled? What are the obstacles impeding success?

Purpose/Objectives

This chapter will focus on examining the issue of access to distance education courses and programs by adult learners, and will center on two basic research questions:

- What are the significant access barriers that adult learners experience while accessing distance education courses and programs?
- What strategies are being utilized, either by individuals or institutions, to address these access barriers?

BACKGROUND

The history of online education is complex with varying opinions of its origin (Sumner, 2000; Zirkle, 2003). One may find its roots in instructional technology and computer-mediated instruction or others in distance education (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006). However, most researchers

argue that the initial form of distance education was provided through correspondence courses (Zirkle, 2003). Correspondence courses' utilize one-way communication through printed course materials and the postal service in order to facilitate the learning process (Sumner, 2000). Sumner (2000) argued that distance education began by the end of the 19th century, during the Industrial Age, when the demands for an educated workforce were great. According to Sumner (2000), "By the end of the 19th century, a number of Canadian, American and European universities offered distance education courses, reflecting the growing public thirst for education" (p. 274). In addition to educational institutions utilization of correspondence courses, both World Wars sparked the proliferation of correspondence courses in military settings as a strategy to transform society.

As new technologies emerged, the limited nature and disadvantages that existed with one-way communication began to subside as new forms of two-way communication proliferated (Sumner, 2000). The establishment of the Open University embodied the innovativeness of a new evolution of distance education and had considerable influence on the development of numerous other institutions (Sumner, 2000). Since the 1970s, the Open University utilized a variety of media for teaching as well as mainframe computer for which students were enabled to access at their local study centers or residential school sites (Jones, Scanlon, Tosunoglu, Ross, Butcher, Murphy, & Greenberg, 1996).

With the increased globalization sparked by the Internet and the World Wide Web, distance education has become more and more pervasive within the 21st century (Friedman, 2005; Li & Irby, 2008; Mupinga, 2005) and has revolutionized the way in which teaching and training is conducted for all ages and contexts (Mupinga, 2005). Distance education has many benefits to learners particularly with its anytime, anywhere convenience (Zirkle, 2003). These benefits are especially important to individuals with work or

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