

# A Place of Transition: Directors' Experiences of Providing Counseling and Advising to Distance Students

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## Abstract

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The growth of distance education options at the postsecondary level has led to a need to reassess how student services are provided to distance learners. This study used qualitative thematic analysis to examine the experiences of student service directors in Canadian postsecondary institutions when providing counseling and advising services to distance students. Some of the key considerations and challenges for service planning that emerge from this study are the need for increased accessibility to services, new modes of communication, and the need to consider the unique expectations and qualities of distance students.

## Résumé

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L'augmentation des options en éducation à distance au niveau postsecondaire a nécessité la réévaluation de la livraison des services aux étudiants à distance. Cette étude a utilisé une analyse qualitative thématique pour examiner les expériences des directeurs de services aux étudiants dans des établissements postsecondaires canadiens, quand des services de counseling sont offerts aux étudiants à distance. Quelques-unes des considérations clés et des défis pour la planification de services qui ont émergé de cette étude sont le besoin d'augmenter l'accessibilité aux services, de trouver de nouveaux modes de communication, et de considérer les attentes uniques et les qualités des étudiants à distance.

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## Introduction

Distance education is a growing trend among many colleges and universities across North America and internationally (Curry, 2003). The growth of distance education in postsecondary institutions has led to a parallel increase in the need for alternative methods of delivering needed services to distance students. Postsecondary institutions are now searching for ways to tackle the challenge of providing services to distance students without compromising the quality of these services or dramatically increasing the cost to students (National Academic Advising Association [NACADA], 1999). The provision of counseling and advising services to students at a distance is one of these challenges.

Although the importance of support services such as counseling and advising to distance learners in postsecondary institutions has been stressed (Peveto, 2000; Tait, 2000), there is little research in the area and little consensus as to how postsecondary institutions can provide distance learners with basic student services such as prospective student advising; assistance with financial concerns; and academic, career, or personal counseling. Published examples of novel technologies in student service exist (Lorenzetti, 2004; Wilka & Fitzner, 1998), but there are few recommendations as to the key issues for consideration when designing and delivering a new model of student advising and counseling services at a distance (Dahl, 2004).

Distance students themselves rank academic advising as the most important student service (Paneitz, 1997). However, most distance students are not aware of the full range of services provided by their institution (Cain, Marrara, Pitre, & Armour, 2003). This suggests that distance students not only face a physical separation from their institutions, but a psychological distance created by the lack of knowledge about their institution and the services available to them.

The purpose of this study is to provide a richer understanding of some of the key issues involved in providing services to distance students. It was part of a larger research project undertaken by the Student Resource Centre at Grant MacEwan College aimed at determining the best practices for providing counseling and advising services to students at a distance. Grant MacEwan College was established in Edmonton in 1971 to serve students in the community. Many of the college's services were designed to be offered in person and have grown along with the college in this manner. Yet the number of programs offering distance learning options to students has been steadily increasing. Currently 17 programs offer distance learning options with a full-time equivalency (FLE) of 555 students enrolled these programs. Because most distance learners study part time, the actual number of students involved is considerably larger. The predicted growth of these programs as well as the growth of eCampus Alberta, a partnership in distance learning between Alberta colleges and technical institutes, will have major implications for the college's services to its increasing number of distance students. Many of these students may find it difficult to access the current counseling and advising services historically provided by the Student Resource Centre. The traditional face-to-face service delivery model no longer meets the needs of these students, many of whom live significant distances from the college's four campuses in Edmonton.

Although it is arguable that no single set of best practices exists for providing these services to distance learners (Tait, 2000), the belief guiding this study was that the knowledge and expertise of others who have

struggled with similar challenges would add depth and richness to our understanding of the important issues involved. Thematic analysis was used to explore the experiences of student service directors when providing traditional student services to nontraditional students. This study is a preliminary investigation of the experiences of key issues affecting best practice.

### Current Understanding of Key Issues

There is often an overlap in the services provided by counseling and advising services in postsecondary institutions. Although some student service centres do not distinguish between these two services (Brown-Di-Thomas, 1999), the Student Resource Centre at Grant MacEwan College does make the following distinction, which is used throughout this article. Counseling services refer to personal and career counseling as well as counseling for academic concerns such as test anxiety or study skills. Advising refers to services that provide admission and program information, new student orientation, and financial assistance information. Although the services often face similar challenges in meeting the needs of distance students, there are some important differences. For example, counseling professionals are often bound by a professional code of ethics, which may have ramifications for interacting with students using certain forms of communication. In addition, the number of students requiring advising services is generally much greater than those requiring counseling, although students who require counseling may need services over an extended period or face life-threatening crises.

#### *Technology Advancement*

A key issue involved in designing and implementing services to distance learners is the rapid advances in communication technology. Across many institutions there is a growing transition to electronic and online student services by college and university administration (Dahl, 2004), possibly in response to recruitment and student preference (Edwards, 2003). For example, a survey of academic advisors found that 97% of advisors used e-mail on a regular basis (National Academic Advising Association Technology in Advising Commission, 2002). Students are requesting and appear satisfied with electronic services. For example, distance learners enrolled in online courses rated online advising the same as or better than advising conducted in person (Brown-Di-Thomas, 1999). Students' use of advising services is not affected by the mode of communication used (Kostin, 2003).

Currently most electronic communication makes use of text-based media (Lonner, 2001). Until Web cameras become more widely used, e-mail and text-based chat comprised the most widely available and easily

accessed forms of electronic communication for use in service provision to distance students.

However, not all students have access to or feel comfortable with electronic forms of communication. In fact a study reported by Statistics Canada (Looker & Thiessen, 2003) notes that there is a “digital divide” among Canadian youth. The analysis of statistical data shows that youth with lower socioeconomic status and youth who live in rural areas are less likely to own a personal computer and have lower levels of computer competence.

In addition, distance learners in busy households or those accessing a computer in a public location may also have difficulty gaining access to the privacy and freedom from distraction necessary for interacting electronically with a counselor or advisor. In line with these issues, it has been stressed that advice and counsel are best provided in the same mode as a student’s distance learning courses (Curry, 2003; Paneitz, 1997) such as providing electronic services to students enrolled in online courses and telephone service or printed information to students enrolled in print-based courses.

### *Ethical and Professional Issues*

Further key considerations are the ethical and professional issues involved in counseling and advising at a distance, particularly using electronic modes of communication. One of the possible risks is that electronic forms of communication may be more susceptible to a breach of confidentiality. For example, system administrators and others with access to the computer used for communication might be able to access e-mail or instant message records. Another noted risk of communicating at a distance is the lack of visual and nonverbal cues. The text-only nature of electronic counseling and the loss of visual cues when using the telephone can make it more difficult to assess students’ issues fully and provide competent services.

Professional issues for consideration in providing advising at a distance include the responsibility for institutions to provide equivalent services to distance students as those provided to on-campus students and the provision of additional services to meet the unique needs of distance learners (NACADA, 1999). The provision of counseling at a distance also carries with it certain ethical and professional considerations. A notable ethical concern is the potential for legal problems when providing counseling to a student in another province or country. For example, provincial or state regulatory bodies may have different requirements for the practice of counseling or reporting of child abuse or harm to a third party. Other pertinent ethical issues include informed consent, confidentiality, the counseling relationship, procedures, and licensure certification.

## Method

### *Design*

This study was part of a larger research project designed to assess the current practices of counseling and advising services provided to distance learners at Canadian postsecondary institutions. As part of this project, student service administrators in Canadian postsecondary institutions were asked to participate in a descriptive survey of their programs and answer open-ended questions about their experiences with pertinent issues that affected the provision of counseling and advising services to distance students.

This study was designed using a qualitative inquiry approach. Cross-participant thematic analysis (Aronson, 1994; Bryne, 2001) was used to uncover relevant themes and ideas from written responses and transcribed interview responses to open-ended survey questions that investigated the experiences of providing counseling and advising services to distance learners. This study was designed to discover and understand the experiences and world views of the participants (Merriam, 1998), with the philosophical assumption that in so doing, it might not be possible to arrive at a universal truth or depiction of reality, but perhaps a collage of interlocking and unique perspectives.

### *Participants*

Potential participants were directors of advising and counseling centres in Canadian universities, colleges, and technical institutes. Purposeful sampling was used to determine those 100 directors surveyed from 53 institutions that offered a significant number of programs through distance means. Of those contacted, 31 agreed to take part: 19 directors were from colleges, 10 from universities, and two from technical institutes, comprising 24 institutions. Most institutions had moderate to extensive distance education programs. In some institutions the roles of the director of the counseling and advising centres were filled by the same person, in which case the participants were given the choice to conduct the survey for their choice of service or for both services. All counseling and advising centres reported having between 1 and 13 staff members. The number of full-time equivalency students attending the institutions varied, with the mode number of institutions having between 2,000 and 5,000 full-time students, and the majority having between 2,000 and 20,000 full-time equivalencies. Interestingly, most participants did not know how many distance students attended their institution or used their services.

### *Survey*

Data were collected as part of a larger research project that consisted of a survey instrument developed for this purpose. The survey instrument consisted of 24 items in two sections and was made available to participants as either a written questionnaire sent by e-mail or as a telephone interview that was then transcribed. The questions were developed in conjunction with an advisory committee, based on a review of the literature and the current needs of the Student Resource Centre at Grant MacEwan College. The survey was then pilot tested for face validity before the study began. The questions on the survey were phrased identically for both interview and questionnaire formats. Telephone interviews were completed in approximately 30-45 minutes. From the pilot test data and feedback from participants this was comparable to the time taken to fill out the written survey.

The first section of the survey was designed to gather descriptive data about the counseling or advising centre, the institutions surveyed, and specific current practices used. The second section, which is the focus of this study, consisted of five open-ended questions designed to invite participants to describe their experience of common issues faced when attempting to provide services to distance students. The five questions were as follows.

- What have been some of the major challenges you have faced in providing services to distance students?
- What are the future directions of your program in terms of providing services to distance students?
- What feedback have distance students given you regarding your services?
- In what other ways does your program address the needs of distance students?
- Do you have any other comments about providing services to distance students?

### *Procedure*

Potential participants were invited to take part in the study with an introductory telephone call. During the introduction to the study, individuals contacted were told about the purpose of the study and were made aware of the voluntary nature of the research project.

Those who agreed to participate were given the option of participating in a structured interview or participating in the study through an e-mail questionnaire with the same items as the structured interview. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw their participation at any time during the interview and their right to withdraw their participa-

tion at a later date before dissemination of the research results. If participants were unsure of the perspectives or activities of their staff, they were encouraged to provide only their own perspectives.

### *Data Analysis Procedure*

Thematic analysis was used as the primary method of data analysis for this qualitative study. For the purposes of this study, the following definition of thematic analysis was used.

Thematic analysis involves the search for and identification of common threads that extend throughout an entire interview or set of interviews. Themes are usually quite abstract and therefore difficult to identify.... Frequently, these themes are concepts indicated by the data rather than concrete entities directly described by the participants.... Once identified, the themes appear to be significant concepts that link substantial portions of the interviews together. (Morse & Field, 1995, pp. 139-140)

Data were analyzed after the completion of data collection. The written responses and transcriptions were organized in paper file folders and were also stored electronically using word-processing software. The initial process in the thematic analysis involved reading through the written responses and interview transcripts several times in an attempt to gain a sense of the data as a whole (Creswell, 1998), and writing marginal notes with initial impressions, associations, and thoughts to document the process (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

In the initial stage of making meaning, data from each question were examined for salient units of text related to the participants' experiences of pertinent issues involved in providing services to distance students. Meaning units were extracted using word-processing software and were placed on index cards using labels. The meaning unit most often used in this process was the sentence, although many consisted of two or more sentences. Interrater reliability was ensured by having three independent analysts involved in the creation of meaning units. This process of triangulation helped to ensure that the emerging findings were consistent with the data. Themes emerged from a process of sorting the cards, during which all researchers kept in mind the purpose of the study. When there was disagreement between coders, the issue was discussed until a mutually agreed-on resolution was reached.

Many of the themes that emerged from the responses to each question were repeated across many or all of the questions. For this reason a further layer of thematic abstraction was undertaken to examine the common issues arising from all five questions as a whole. This level of analysis was conducted in the same manner.

## Results

Six major themes emerged as a result of the thematic analysis of participants' responses about their experiences of providing counseling and advising services to distance students. Table 1 outlines the major themes and the subthemes from which they were derived. The six themes are described in detail as follows. *Technological and Practical Challenges* refers to the challenges faced by student service administrators when using new distance technology. *Institutional Challenges* refers to the barriers to providing counseling and advising services to distance students at the institutional level. *Professional Challenges* refers to the professional constraints of counselors when providing services at a distance. *Attempted Remedies* refers to practices aimed at addressing some of the challenges of providing services to distance students. *Distance Learner Needs* refers to the effort to take into account the needs of distance students when delivering programs. *Delivery-Mode Approximation* refers to attempts to find an existing model for providing services to distance students.

### *Technological and Practical Challenges*

A major theme that emerged from the data was the number and extent of the technological and practical challenges inherent in providing counseling and advising services to distance students. This theme was present in response to all five questions. Aspects concerning the use of new technology were a large component of this theme, with concerns arising about the difficulty of communicating with students using asynchronous or electronically mediated forms of communication. One participant commented that the varying skill bases of all individuals involved can be a challenge, noting that "access to, or comfort using, technology differs among students and prospective students." Others mentioned the challenge of communication using text-only technology such as Internet-based chat or e-mail. As one participant noted, "[one] must have excellent communication skills to compensate for the lack of body language."

Further to this, other participants noted their experiences of the potential for more anonymous communication with students to bring difficulties such as increased complaints or abusive comments. For example, "sometimes students use the anonymity of distance ed. as an excuse to behave less well than they would if in person."

Others noted more practical challenges in communicating with distance students for the purposes of counseling or advising. Some pointed out that it was challenging simply to reach a student for a telephone conversation. One participant noted that "time zone differences are always a challenge" in this regard. Another participant described the frustrating process of connecting with a student: "I had to phone, set up



Table 1

<i>Major Theme</i>	<i>Subtheme</i>
Technological and Practical Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Low comfort with technology among staff and students</li> <li>Inappropriate behaviour by students</li> <li>Possibility for misunderstanding</li> <li>Balancing ease of access with quality</li> <li>Difficulty establishing contact with students</li> </ul>
Institutional Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of institutional resources</li> <li>Challenges of partnerships with other institutions</li> <li>Promoting awareness of services to students and staff</li> <li>Providing timely services</li> </ul>
Professional Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Risk management</li> </ul>
Attempted Remedies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adding new modes of communication</li> <li>Alternatives to providing services</li> <li>More/better information on the service Web site</li> <li>Providing unique services</li> <li>Increased contact between departments and services</li> <li>Increased connection between faculty and service staff</li> <li>Increasing the accessibility of services</li> <li>Streamlining services</li> <li>Reactive response to providing services</li> <li>Treating distance students the same as on-site students</li> </ul>
Distance Learner Needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tailoring services to student needs</li> <li>Collection of formal feedback from distance students</li> <li>Expectation of instant, available services</li> <li>Need for distance students to be motivated and resourceful</li> <li>Providing unique services</li> </ul>
Delivery-Mode Approximation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attempts to find existing models</li> <li>Co-op and practicum students as distance students</li> </ul>

the appointment, and then call back. [You] can't be even one minute late or the call will go to voice mail."

A further practical challenge is attempting to understand the context in which students may be living when coming from another location. Participants noted that various cultures, communities, standards of living, and legal requirements may need to be taken into account when providing counseling and advising services to students at a distance. The following response is illustrative of one aspect of this challenge: "Understanding the differences in cost of living components such as room and board is very difficult when dealing with students who live in large metropolitan areas or in other countries."

One participant commented on the challenge of balancing convenient Web-based information with the quality service of speaking with an ad-

visor. This person noted, “many students now bypass our best advising through various self-service options. We are trying to balance easy access with ensuring students are well prepared for what they are getting into.”

### *Institutional Challenges*

The responses included in this theme referred to the institutional challenges involved in providing counseling and advising services to distance students. Many participants referred to the limited funding for counseling and advising services. Service directors were unable to offer the same range of services to distance students because of an increased cost for the needed technology. One participant noted that providing their services to distance students “is tricky because we usually have to do it via phone at the expense of the student.” Another said, “right now we are only offering a minimum of services to distance students; we don’t have the resources, so we don’t actively promote it.”

Participants also described the challenge of finding and informing distance students at their institution of the counseling and advising services available. As one participant noted, one of the important challenges was “making sure that all DE [distance education] students are aware of all the student supports available to them.” Another participant explained,

Many students take classes from other institutions and we will not know who they are until they contact us. It would be great if the institutions called us and then we could let the student know what services we offer.

The above statement also spoke to a further notable issue at the institutional level: the new challenges that emerge when partnering with other institutions to provide distance education. Respondents discussed the challenge of inter-institutional partnerships and the need for better determination of the responsibility for providing student services. For example, “with the increases in DL [distance learning] students and variety of new options (e.g., [inter-provincial partnership]) we all need to devise new strategies to ensure the needs of DL students are being met.” Another participant questioned the possibility of students falling through the gaps in service provision between institutional partnerships, stating that “[our institution] is a ‘custodial’ partner, what happens when students on campus are in a crisis?”

### *Professional Challenges*

Many of the participants responsible for counseling services in their institution reported a concern for the risks involved in providing counseling services to distance students when this required the use of methods other than face-to-face interaction. These concerns involved the professional and ethical issues involved in the loss of nonverbal information and the in-

creased risk of a breach of confidentiality when communicating using electronic means such as e-mail. The following response is illustrative of many of these concerns.

Counselors provide information and referrals to distance students, but we do not provide counseling due to ethical concerns: e.g., the confidentiality of e-mail communication cannot be guaranteed; a lack of nonverbal cues makes it difficult to communicate effectively by phone/e-mail; the concern that students may become suicidal (better to refer to a professional counselor in their home community who can provide face-to-face support and ensure their safety—i.e., accompany them to ER if necessary).

### *Attempted Remedies*

All participants commented on how they tried to meet the above challenges when providing counseling and advising services to distance students. Many participants discussed the addition of new modes of communication as a tool to meet the challenges of communicating with students at a distance. Participants described using live chat options, Web conferences, e-mail, and telephone to provide their advising and counseling services. In addition, many participants noted the importance of keeping the Web site of the service up to date or adding new features to it. For example, adding “interactive program plans that allow students to explore options (without all the manual processes currently needed to support this exploration)” or using a “hybrid counseling model: communicating face-to-face, by e-mail, and by telephone.”

Participants also noted the importance of maintaining contact between staff in the counseling and advising service and other faculty and staff of the institution. As one participant noted, “there needs to be transparency between all programs and the advising services provided.” One participant stressed collaboration between counseling and advising services and those staff who interact most with the distance students.

Often the instructors/tutors involved in the actual delivery of the academic program are the most connected person to the DL students. The instructional staff often provide academic advice and/or will bring issues forward to our attention so we can assist a DL student.

Other service directors noted the use of increased accessibility of the service to meet the needs of distance students. Participants told of increasing access by staying open after regular business hours or attempting to streamline services. One participant noted institutional shifts in this direction: “the Distance Education department is looking to tailor their Web site towards a one-stop shop concept.”

Due to the ethical and professional concerns of some of the directors of counseling centres, some participants noted that although they did not provide personal counseling to their distance students, they did provide alternatives to these services such as providing information and referrals to students about resources in their home community. Other participants noted contracts with employee assistance program companies or informal arrangements with other postsecondary institutions for the provision of counseling to distance students. Not all counseling directors in this study offered these alternatives. Some stated that they simply did not provide counseling services to distance students, whereas others were actively engaged in Web-based counseling through teleconference, Web-cameras, e-mail, and telephone.

A further emerging subtheme was the solution of treating distance students as if they were regular students. Responses coded in this sub-theme indicated that some participants had not yet recognized the unique needs of distance students, offering the same services to distance students in the same mode as those offered to on-site students. Illustrative responses included, "we have not recognized the needs of distance students," and "in theory we provide service, in practice they get ripped off. Most service is walk-in."

### *Distance Learner Needs*

This theme addressed the need for counseling and advising services to tailor their services to the unique needs of distance students. Participants noted the unique expectations and needs of distance students. In particular, participants discussed the idea that the current generation of students tends to expect quick and mobile services. Illustrative responses included "many students can't come during the day," and "today people expect to get help on a 24/7 basis." As well, participants recognized the demands placed on distance students, requiring them to be more motivated and resourceful than traditional students. As one participant put it, "distance ed students have to be more resourceful, more mature." Apart from recognizing the unique needs of distance students, other participants reflected the idea that it is necessary for counseling and advising centres to base their services on those needs. The words of one participant illustrate this idea simply by stating the need to "listen to your students."

As a result of tailoring services to the needs of distance students, some participants described the unique services that are offered only to distance students or have originated in response to their unique needs. For example, one participant commented, "counseling centres can provide help on learning how to be more individualized learners." Others noted specific initiatives for distance students such as a full-time staff member

devoted to this issue or “a distance education preparatory tool on the Web.”

### *Delivery-Mode Approximation*

This theme refers to the attempts of participants to determine the best practices of providing counseling and advising services to distance students and the search for a service delivery model. One participant responded by saying, “I have wondered how distance schools like Athabasca [University] handle counseling.” Other participants called for an expansion of the definition of distance students. Although many may think of distance students as those enrolled in distance education courses, these participants pointed out that students on a practicum placement in a different location or students on an exchange program may be considered distance students. These students may probably have the same needs for service as many of the distance education students. This is illustrated by the comment of a participant who noted that the issues discussed in this study “connects to the counselling we are sometimes asked to provide to co-op students who are out on work placements.”

## Discussion and Implications

The move from traditional lecture-based postsecondary education toward distance education has been described as a paradigm shift (Langford & Hardin, 1999). Kuhn (1970) described paradigms as the foundational assumptions and contextually-grounded scientific beliefs underlying scientific theory. He observed that in the physical sciences, current understandings did not appear to build gradually from one set of observations to the next. Rather, a dramatic shift in understanding occurred as one paradigm was replaced with another, often after a time of challenge and debate. Although Kuhn’s notion describes shifts of foundational beliefs in the physical sciences, disciplines in the social sciences have since used the idea of paradigm shifts to describe similar radical changes in foundational belief systems or theories.

Langford and Hardin (1999) argue that the shift from traditional education to distance education is akin to a paradigm shift in which didactic forms of education are being replaced by a constructivist understanding of learning. They describe distance education as a paradigm of simultaneity in which the distance student is “a synergistic being in open, mutual interchange with the environment. The person freely chooses, is responsible for the choices, and creates meaning from his/her reality” (p. 195). They contrast this way of learning with the more traditional paradigm in which learning is unidirectional, from teacher to student.

It appears that the participants in this study may be describing a paradigm shift in the foundational thinking about student service

provision. The participants involved in this study relayed their experiences of distance students, describing them as needing to be more motivated and independent than traditional students. Participants also described how, in their experience, distance learners tended to expect increased accessibility to student services. These increased expectations are shared with members of the millennial generation of postsecondary students (Oblinger, 2003), which has also been driving a shift in thinking about how student services have traditionally been delivered (Bigger, 2005). Participants recognized many of the challenges involved when providing services to distance students. Thinking at the level of the paradigm, it may be that some of these challenges stem from the period of challenge and debate inherent in adjusting to a new way of thinking about students' expectations and needs. The current period may be thought of as a transition period in which student service administrators attempt to relate traditional practices of student service delivery to students who are used to receiving nontraditional educational options. As with many transitions, there may be many practical, institutional, and professional challenges with no precedent for action other than the trial-and-error method of figuring out what works best.

The experiences of participants appeared to reflect various stages of a paradigm shift in service delivery. Responses such as "at this time we have no plans to adjust our services" may reflect the belief that current services can be applied to distance students in traditional ways. Some participants appeared to recognize a change beginning, but had yet to adapt practice to address this change. This is illustrated in responses such as "accessibility is vital so we expect an increase in e-counselling and will need to adapt our system to meet this challenge." Finally, some participants appeared to be attempting various strategies in a trial-and-error fashion: "many students can't come during the day. So we've tried in the past having a satellite service in education. This didn't work so we've stopped doing it. On Monday and Wednesday we're open until 8."

In examining the wealth of qualitative data generated from this study, it is clear that the Student Resource Centre must respond to the unique needs of distance students when planning and implementing services. Participants recognized that the current generation of distance students is more likely to expect highly accessible and available service. Distance learners are also required to perform at a higher level than traditional students, needing to be more motivated and resourceful in completing their studies. Some of the centres involved in this study have already begun to recognize these unique needs by providing a variety of services unique to distance students such as distance learner needs assessment or a distance student contact person.

A deeper understanding of the practical, institutional, and professional challenges present at other postsecondary institutions, as well as the attempted remedies to these challenges, will aid the Student Resource Centre in service planning. Currently staff have been debating the degree to which it is possible to provide the full complement of counseling services to distance students. Due to mounting ethical and professional concerns about confidentiality, lack of nonverbal information, and jurisdictional regulations, we have decided that it is not feasible at this time for Grant MacEwan College to offer personal counseling over the telephone or by text-based communication. However, counselors will continue to provide referrals to distance students who request personal counseling and can provide information and educational counseling to distance learners using the telephone and current text-based forms of electronic communication. The centre is also in the process of adapting student consent forms to include increased electronic communication in the future.

Perhaps one of the most important implications of this study was the understanding that for future program planning, the centre must be proactive rather than reactive in how it provides counseling and advising services to distance learners at the college. Rather than treating distance students like traditional students, forethought and planning must be used to anticipate the needs and expectations of distance students and the potential challenges in providing services. In this vein, the Student Resource Centre has formed an advisory committee responsible for directing the future of services at a distance. This committee also links staff of the Student Resource Centre with other Grant MacEwan College faculty and staff, which responds to what participants noted as important in providing quality service to distance learners.

Part of a proactive stance to service provision will probably involve writing policy and procedures documents that address the following key issues: (a) the scope of services that will be made available to distance students; (b) those unique services that could be offered to distance students; and (c) a policy for e-mail and other forms of electronic communication with all students, including distance students. Such policy and procedures documents can help to promote future-oriented thinking about communicating at a distance and a consistency of service by staff across campuses.

The results of this study suggest that many of these services could be of benefit to all students, particularly those who cannot receive face-to-face services as historically provided. In fact the participants in this study helped us to widen the definition of distance students, at least for the purposes of planning student services. Although we had previously defined distance students as those who were enrolled in distance learning

courses, a large number of students cannot receive services during regular office hours and therefore may require services at a distance. This group includes students on international exchange, students on co-op or practicum placements, and students who hold full-time jobs during the day. All these groups may require nontraditional forms of service provision.

Finally, a key idea that emerged from the responses of participants was the need to increase accessibility of services. Participants in this study gave many unique and creative ideas for increasing the accessibility of counseling and advising services to distance students. As noted above, by increasing accessibility to distance students, many of these strategies may serve to benefit all students at the college. The Student Resource Centre will be considering many options for increasing the accessibility of its services, including the following.

- Increasing the amount of information available on the service Web site;
- Increasing the ease of access or navigation of the service Web site;
- Providing services outside traditional office hours;
- Advertising the college's toll-free number on the Web site and other information sent to distance students;
- Increasing contact with other faculty and staff to assist in increased staff and student awareness of available services to students;
- Offering live chat advising to prospective students.

### Future Directions for Research

An increased understanding of the issues involved in providing services such as counseling and advising to distance students is clearly necessary. Future research on the needs and expectations of distance students and prospective distance students in terms of providing student services will assist administrators in service planning and implementation. An understanding of best practices in the provision of student services would also be greatly aided by increased sharing of knowledge through publication of current student service planning, implementation, and evaluation by postsecondary institutions in Canada. In particular there appears to be a need for program evaluation research to examine the outcome data of existing programs for distance students.

In addition, future research to examine electronic counseling options in a postsecondary setting would be greatly beneficial. Although many documents discuss the risks and benefits of electronic counseling, no research has examined the use of electronic counseling in postsecondary institutions, where many of the counseling services may not constitute personal counseling, but may be considered academic or educational counseling. Research to examine the implementation and evaluation of such practices



would add to an understanding of best practice and lead to practical recommendations for use in postsecondary settings.

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