

DIALOGUE/DIALOGUE

A Response to Brindley and Jean-Louis

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In the Spring 1990 issue of the *Journal of Distance Education*, a case is made by Brindley and Jean-Louis for making selected student support services mandatory for students in distance education programs. They argue that too many students in distance education do not take advantage of student support services available to them. This results from either a lack of awareness that such services exist or from a failure to recognize the benefits that such services provide. Brindley and Jean-Louis contend that the consequences of distance education students failing to avail themselves of such services contributes to excessively high rates of drop-out. In brief, they argue that an "interventionist" role is necessary in which selected student support services would become mandatory.

Brindley and Jean-Louis provide an articulate argument that is apparently supported by the experience of their own institution and the preliminary studies it has undertaken. The purpose of this response is to raise two questions of clarification concerning their proposal and then to identify concerns regarding several assumptions on which the proposal rests.

Clarification is needed regarding what student support services would be mandatory and to which students this practice would apply. The services are described only as "...a very directive pre-admission and pre-registration service..." and "...counselling interventions such as study skills...." The pre-admission and pre-registration services are of particular concern. Brindley and Jean-Louis themselves raise the questions as to whether these are "...actually an institutional screening mechanism under the guise of 'help'?" In other words, would the imposition of these services have the desired effect of increasing the number of students who succeed, yet do so without discouraging significant numbers of students from enrolling as a consequence of the additional barriers they perceive to confront them?

Which students would be required to participate in these mandatory student services is not clear. In several sections of their paper, Brindley and Jean-Louis suggest that only those students who are identified as being "at risk"

would be the obligatory recipients of these services. In a similar vein, others have suggested the selective provision of student support services to students in distance education programs (Bracht, 1970; Caron, 1982; Thompson & Knox, 1987). These authors, however, have not suggested that those who are targeted to receive these services would be compelled to utilize them. Rather, they would be especially encouraged to do so. Elsewhere in their paper, Brindley and Jean-Louis suggest that all prospective students would be exposed to the pre-admission and pre-registration processes.

Brindley and Jean-Louis outline a proposed study that will include a sample of students from all three groups they identify: those most likely to succeed, those most likely to fail, and those perceived to be at risk. They indicate that the experimental phase will invite student participation in the utilization of selected student services, but the intention would be to make these services mandatory if they were shown to be effective. This raises questions both of research methodology and of institutional philosophy. If the experimental phase is voluntary, as they indicate, can the results provide valid guidance in the determination of the value of compulsory services? In regard to institutional philosophy, one has to consider at what level drop-out rates become intolerable. If the primary purpose of distance education programs is to provide access to those constrained by geography or personal circumstance, then we can and should expect to attract a certain number of "at risk" students who may contribute to drop-out rates that some educational administrators find embarrassing. On the other hand, institutional efforts to reduce dropout levels may inadvertently have the effect of significantly limiting (real and/or perceived) access.

There is a risk in defining our institutional mandates through the results of empirical studies of present participants in our programs rather than through the application of policies and principles deemed to be of fundamental importance. As Daniel and Marquis (1979) note, there is an ideological issue that must be addressed between respecting the freedom and autonomy of the individual student and recognizing the extent to which doing so may increase drop-out rates. They suggest that distance education programs that allow students to commence studies whenever they choose and to finish at their individual convenience can expect drop-out rates of over 50% (p. 34). Reducing the degree of accommodation will likely frustrate some students who may well be at risk of dropping out. Accordingly, we can reduce the drop-out level if we restrict the degree of accommodation. The price of doing so, however, is a potential loss of accessibility for some who would have succeeded.

Brindley and Jean-Louis make several assumptions that warrant critical attention. First, it is assumed that we can identify those who are "at risk" with considerable accuracy. Brindley and Jean-Louis report that an institutional study at Athabasca University predicted probable student completion or non-completion "...with about 70% accuracy." But how effective were the predictions concerning only those who did not complete? Previous studies have demonstrated that predictions of completers can be made with some confidence. In particular, the previous successful completion of a distance education course is a significant predictor of subsequent success. But, especially among those students who are registering for their first distance education course, how reliable are our predictive strategies? The length of time that has elapsed since participation in formal study can also significantly affect the predictive effectiveness of factors such as prior grade point average and level of educational attainment. It has been proposed that dropout is a complex phenomenon that is the consequence of multiple factors (Bartels, 1982; Bernard and Amundsen, 1989; Malley, Brown, & Williams, 1976; Rekkedal, 1983; Woodley & Parlett, 1983).

Accordingly, we must recognize that any effort to identify persons at risk of dropping out is likely to fail to identify some who are at risk and identify others who are, in fact, capable of succeeding. The latter group is of particular concern. Two problems can result from incorrectly identifying these students. The first concerns the possibility of creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. There is considerable research evidence to suggest that instructor and/or institutional expectations can greatly affect performance outcomes. Secondly, if these students are required to participate in student support services they do not wish to receive or that are seen as barriers, they may withdraw or not register in the first instance.

The second assumption that warrants review is that students cannot be trusted to make the decision that is in their own best interest. It assumes that institutions can more accurately assess student needs than the students themselves. Further it assumes that students will accept the outcome and the consequence of that assessment. Brindley and Jean-Louis state that their institutional approach has been based "...on the assumption that self-directed adult learners will take responsibility for their own learning process, including making choices about whether they need information or advice about their studies." They refer to a "...change in direction from a strong philosophy of self-referral to one of intervention...." This change is the result of several factors. The major ones they identify are: an institutional goal of improving completion rates, the recent availability of better infor-

mation about the student population, and the challenge of being more effective with fewer resources. But these factors are hardly compelling ones for such a dramatic shift in institutional philosophy. Many studies have reported tactical approaches to improving completion rates, such as reducing the delay in providing feedback on assignments (Rekkedal, 1983) and providing systematic telephone tutoring (Thompson & Knox, 1987). But an institution can implement an aggressive program aimed at improving its completion rates without having to fundamentally alter its institutional philosophy about who it seeks to serve. The limited information provided regarding the student population, including reference to very limited utilization of student support services, is hardly compelling. Many other studies have reported similar underutilization of support services (Ahlm, 1972; Flinck, 1978; Holmberg, 1985; Orton, 1978; Thompson & Knox, 1987). Although these data reveal a surprisingly low level of student-initiated utilization of support services, it does not necessarily follow that compulsory utilization is the appropriate approach to take. It seems reasonable to assume that many of those individuals who elect not to avail themselves of these services would derive little benefit from them and prefer to work on their own. Studies by Beijer (1972), Caron (1982), and Potter (1983) confirm that many students in distance education programs prefer such independence.

The third assumption is the rejection of the view that students attracted to correspondence study are particularly self-motivated, independent learners. Brindley and Jean-Louis incorrectly attribute to Daniel and Marquis (1979) that this view is "shortsighted." In fact, Daniel and Marquis were critical of "young institutions such as the Télé-université which do not have, nor feel the need for, a counselling service...." They suggested that distance education programs often begin with a "cream-skimming" whereby they initially attract students possessing a higher motivation and greater experience than those who will provide the continuing clientele for their programs in subsequent years. I would subscribe to this view, but would suggest that even in the case of established distance education programs those students who are *attracted* to distance education are especially well-motivated and independent students. Similarly, Daniel and Marquis (1979) state that "most remote learning systems recruit their students among working adults. Although such students are *highly motivated*, family and professional obligations compete with their studies for the little spare time they have available" [italics mine]. Paul (1986) describes the differences that Athabasca University has observed between urban and rural students. He states that "...the self-paced home study mode of delivery is particularly

appealing to the urban student who cannot or chooses not to attend classes at local college or university campuses. He or she opts for the autonomy and control over the learning environment that Athabasca provides" (p. 139). By contrast, Paul observes that the rural student often has no other choice and indicates that previous research has suggested that such students would prefer a more interactive learning environment than is provided through home study. We must be conscious of evidence suggesting that some students are attracted to distance education programs because of the autonomy and independence that it offers (Beijer, 1972; Caron, 1982; Flinck, 1978; Holmberg, 1989; Potter, 1983). Such students might be deterred by programs with compulsory participation in student support services that they judge to be unnecessary and unwelcome.

What, then, should we conclude? I would agree with Roberts (1984) who proposed that, in light of the many differences that characterize distance education programs and institutions, what seems a good approach for one institution may be quite inappropriate for another. Nonetheless, I would offer two last observations. The first is that a range of intervention strategies are available to us, from compulsory student participation in student support services to merely making their availability known. If we find that many of our students are not aware that such services exist, then we need to re-examine the ways in which we advertise them. If student services are made mandatory, we must ask if the potential benefit of reduced drop-out rates is likely to be greater than the potential reduction in accessibility? The decision to make services mandatory may well create more problems than it resolves.

Secondly, we need to be aware of the "cream-skimming" metaphor described by Daniel and Marquis (1979). It may be argued that many potential distance education students see these programs as not meeting their needs and interests (Thompson, 1990). If it is the case that many students who choose to enrol in distance education courses are more autonomous and independent than those who do not, it is possible that we need to develop, implement, and *effectively publicize* the availability of adequate support services in order to reach those who would benefit from them. If distance education programs are to achieve their potential in terms of optimal accessibility, we may need to determine the model of student support services in light of those not presently in our programs and whom we are trying to attract, rather than by considering only the needs of those presently enrolled.

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