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## ABSTRACT

A QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY WAS MADE OF 364 STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK (SUNY) CORRESPONDENCE COURSE DROPOUTS. RESPONSES CAME FROM 187. COLLEGE CREDIT, CAREER-RELATED SKILLS, SELF-IMPROVEMENT, AND CERTIFICATION OF COLLEGE DEGREE REQUIREMENTS HAD BEEN THE LEADING MOTIVES FOR ENROLLING; MAJOR REASONS FOR DISCONTINUING INVOLVED INSTRUCTORS AND ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURES (ESPECIALLY LATE RETURN OF LESSONS), FOLLOWED BY LOW MOTIVATION, POOR LEARNING ORIENTATION, OTHER DEMANDS ON ONE'S TIME, CHANGES IN ONE'S PLANS, AND COURSE CONTENT. NO CLOSE RELATIONSHIP WAS SEEN BETWEEN THE TWO SETS OF REASONS. OF ALL RESPONDENTS, 75% FAILED TO TURN IN LESSONS BEYOND THE 1/4 POINT AND 34% SUBMITTED NO LESSONS; HOWEVER, 63% INDICATED THAT THEY HAD LEARNED SOMETHING FROM THE COURSE, WHILE 40% PLANNED TO COMPLETE THEIR COURSE EVENTUALLY. ALL RESPONDENTS HAD AT LEAST A HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATION AND 68% HAD HAD SOME COLLEGE. ABOUT 22% WERE ENROLLED IN MORE THAN ONE CORRESPONDENCE COURSE, AND 28% WERE TAKING OTHER COLLEGE CREDIT COURSES. MEN AND WOMEN DIFFERED SIGNIFICANTLY IN AGE DISTRIBUTION, EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND, AND COURSE LOAD. FINDINGS SHOWED, AMONG OTHER THINGS, A NEED FOR BETTER STUDENT COUNSELING. (AUTHOR/LY)

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WHY SUNY STUDENTS FAIL  
TO COMPLETE  
INDEPENDENT STUDY COURSES

December, 1969

Donald Harter

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## "Why SUNY Students Fail to Complete Independent Study Courses."

The following brief is presented as a preview of the findings:

### Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine why enrollees in SUNY independent study courses do not carry their courses through to completion. The findings were desired to develop methods of improving the completion rate.

### Design of the Study

Questionnaires were mailed to the population of 364 SUNY students who have discontinued their study in at least one correspondence course. The term "discontinued" referred to a student who had neither completed the course nor extended his enrollment during the 12 month period since the date of his initial enrollment. If a student had discontinued his enrollment in several courses, he was asked to select the one course he would prefer to use in answering the questionnaire.

The time period covered in the study started with the date SUNY campuses first began enrolling independent study students to June 30, 1969 inclusive. After mailing follow-up letters to the 364 students involved, a 52 per cent response level was obtained. The response level was considered quite high; previous research has shown that students who discontinue are relatively unresponsive and may construe questionnaire follow-up as pressure put upon them to complete their work.

Replies were tabulated to identify the main reasons for discontinuing. The problems presented by the enrollees were analyzed from the standpoint of possible ways to correct them.

### Assumptions of the Study

It was assumed that the respondents were fairly representative of the actual population of students who have dropped out of correspondence study courses. In other words, it was assumed

that the reaction of these respondents would serve as a valid basis for making decisions affecting current and future students served by the Independent Study Program.

### Main Findings

1. In order of frequency, the following main reasons for enrolling were given: to obtain college credit (23 per cent); desire for self-improvement (20 per cent); to develop career-related skills (14 per cent); to satisfy a certification requirement (9 per cent); and to satisfy a college degree requirement (8 per cent).
2. The most frequently given reason for discontinuing involved the instructor's late return of lessons.
3. Of the reasons given for discontinuing, problems involving the instructor and administrative procedures were mentioned most often (24 per cent). In order of frequency, other major reasons centered on problems involving: the enrollee's motivation and his learning orientation (22 per cent); other demands on the enrollee's time (19 per cent); new developments and changes in the enrollee's plans (15 per cent); content of the course itself (15 per cent); and miscellaneous reasons (5 per cent).
4. There did not appear to be a close relationship between the reasons given for enrolling and those stated for discontinuing.
5. Seventy-five per cent of the respondents failed to go beyond the one-quarter point in the number of lessons turned in; 34 per cent did not submit any lessons.
6. Despite discontinuing, a clear majority (63 per cent) of the respondents indicated that they had learned something from the course; 40 per cent indicated they planned to complete the course sometime in the future.
7. Of the 187 respondents, the distribution was 57 per cent women and 43 per cent men; one-half were over thirty years of age; all had at least a high school education and the vast majority (69 per cent) had some college experience.
8. About 14 per cent of the respondents had taken a high school or college-level correspondence course prior to enrolling in SUNY independent study work. About 22 per cent of those who discontinued were enrolled in more than one independent study course; 28 per cent were

taking a course for college credit on campus or at an extension center during the time they were taking SUNY independent study work.

9. The data revealed noteworthy differences between men and women in the following areas: (a) more of the women were over 40 years of age; (b) considerably more of the men had taken some graduate work; (c) a higher proportion of men had taken high school or college correspondence work prior to enrolling in the SUNY program; and (d) a greater number of men said they were taking a course for credit on campus or at an extension center while enrolled in SUNY correspondence work.

### Conclusions

1. The course seemed to be of benefit to the large majority of the enrollees, despite the fact of non-completion.
2. Of all the reasons given, the one mentioned most frequently concerned the instructor's late return of corrected lessons. Enrollees had multiple reasons for discontinuing, however, rather than a single major cause.
3. There are suggestions that a sizable number of the difficulties presented as reasons for discontinuing could have been avoided by more careful planning by the enrollee. Enrollees often would have been better advised to postpone enrollment, to take fewer courses, or to take different courses. The findings suggest that more effective student counseling both prior to enrollment and during the course, could have greatly reduced the number of discontinued enrollments.
4. The findings give promise of serving both the effectiveness and economy of corrective action which might be taken. First, the data concerning both the proportion of lessons completed and reasons for enrolling could be used by campuses in developing procedures to motivate enrollees to continue their study. Secondly, campuses could use the study's findings to improve administrative procedures and to resolve specific difficulties involving the instructor.

### Recommendations

Improvement is needed in the total effort made by campus administrators and instructors to serve the correspondence student. Specifically, it is recommended that:

1. The late return of lessons should be a priority item for a plan of corrective action taken by campuses. In addition, campuses should plan appropriate corrective action to ensure the prompt delivery of course materials. The study's data reveal that the above conditions influence a sizable number of students to discontinue.
2. Campus administrators should make a concerted communications effort to supplement and reinforce the relationship between instructor and student. Comments made by this study's respondents suggest that most campuses presently are making only a minimal effort to communicate with students.
3. Both campus administrators and correspondence instructors should make a special effort to encourage enrollees during their early months of study. The study's data indicate that one-third of the students discontinue without submitting any lessons.
4. Whenever possible, campuses should provide pre-enrollment counseling for enrollees; also, counseling should be available during the student's progress in the course. As indicated by this study's data, a large number of problems experienced by enrollees could have been either prevented or eliminated by more effective counseling.

## RESULTS

To provide insight into the interpretation of the findings, data relating to the respondents will be presented first; followed by a description of the reasons given for enrolling in and discontinuing from courses.

### Characteristics of Respondents

#### Age of Respondents

Only 6 per cent of the respondents were under 21 years of age. The largest proportion (68 per cent) of the sample was in the 21-40 age group. Exactly 26 per cent of the respondents were over 40 years of age (Table 1).

Table 1

"How old Were you on Your Last Birthday?"

	<u>Total Respondents</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>
	%	%	%
18-20	6	5	7
21-25	21	23	20
26-30	23	29	18
31-35	14	15	13
36-40	10	10	11
41 or older	26	18	31
	—	—	—
Totals	100	100	100

#### Educational Level

As shown in Table 2, all of the respondents had at least a high school education and the vast majority had some college experience. Almost one-fifth had completed at least one graduate course; a notable difference was found in this regard. Considerably more men than women had taken some graduate work.

Table 2

"What is the Highest Educational Level you Have Attained?"

	<u>Total Respondents</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>
	%	%	%
High School	31	19	40
1-yr. college	12	14	11
2-yrs. college	27	22	31
4-yrs. college	11	13	9
1 or more grad. courses	19	32	9
Totals	100	100	100

Previous Experience

About 14 per cent of the respondents reported that they had previously taken a high school or college-level correspondence course prior to enrolling in this course. Exactly 24 per cent of the men as compared to only 6 per cent of the women reported that they had taken previous work by correspondence; it was speculated that the men may have had an opportunity during a period of military service to take courses through the USAFI Institute (Table 3).

Table 3

"Did you Ever Take a High School or College-Level Correspondence Course Prior to Enrolling in This Course?"

	<u>Total Respondents</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>
	%	%	%
Yes	14	24	6
No	86	76	93
Totals	100	100	100

Student Workload

Just over one-fifth (22 per cent) of the respondents stated that they were enrolled in at least one additional correspondence course for college credit while taking this course. Slightly more than three-fourths (78 per cent) indicated that they were enrolled only in the course from which they discontinued their study (Table 4).

Table 4

"During the Time you Were Taking This Course, how Many Additional Correspondence Courses for College Credit Were you Enrolled in?"

	<u>Total Respondents</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>
	%	%	%
None	78	84	74
One	17	13	20
2 or more	5	3	6
	—	—	—
Totals	100	100	100

As shown in Table 5, slightly more than one-fourth (28 per cent) of the respondents indicated that they were also taking a course for college credit on campus or at an extension center. Considerably more men than women indicated that they were taking courses of this kind.

Table 5

"During the Time you Were Enrolled in This Course, Were you Also Taking a Course for College Credit on Campus or at an Extension Center?"

	<u>Total Respondents</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>
	%	%	%
Yes	28	37	21
No	72	63	79
	—	—	—
Totals	100	100	100

Reasons for Enrolling

Students were asked to indicate the one main reason that they enrolled in the course. It was recognized that the typical enrollee usually has more than one reason for undertaking a learning activity. Previous research has shown, however, that enrollees usually can identify a main reason for enrolling from a list of alternatives.<sup>1\*</sup>

Main Reasons

In general, differences between men and women were not considered appreciable concerning reasons for enrolling (Table 6).

Table 6

"What is the one Main Reason That you Enrolled in this Course?"

	<u>Total</u> <u>Respondents</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>
	%	%	%
College credit needed.....	23	24	22
Self-improvement.....	20	18	24
Develop career-related skills.....	14	16	11
Certification purposes.....	9	13	7
Satisfy a college degree requirement.....	8	5	10
Unable to take the course any other way.....	8	10	6
Some other reason.....	8	4	10
Develop skills related to current job.....	6	6	6
Refresher course.....	3	3	3
Repeat because of failure or low grade.....	1	1	1
Totals	100	100	100

<sup>1\*</sup> Figures appearing in the text refer to publications listed by number under "End Notes" at the end of this report.

Exactly 40 per cent of the main reasons reported involved a need (1) to obtain college credit; (2) to meet certification requirements; and (3) to satisfy a college degree requirement. It would appear that these students had a clear idea of their educational goals. Indeed the lack of goal-clarity is often claimed to be an important cause of non-completion.

Other main reasons reported by a sizable number of respondents related to a recognized need for self-improvement (20 per cent) and the need to develop career-related skills (14 per cent). These reasons were interpreted as representing fairly strong sources of motivation. Exactly 8 per cent of the respondents reported that they were unable to take the course any other way except by correspondence. This reason was interpreted as being a weak source of motivation to meet the challenge of self-discipline required. (Table 6).

In response to an open-end item, 8 per cent indicated that they had some other reason for enrolling which was not listed among the alternatives. Among the reasons given by these respondents were: (1) to satisfy a prerequisite for a planned course of study; (2) to satisfy one's curiosity; and (3) to receive instruction from a popular professor who was teaching the course (Table 6).

#### Comparison With Other Research

When the main reasons given for enrolling are compared with other research, these data take on more significance. From an overall viewpoint, this study's data are in close agreement with results from correspondence drop-out research reported by Hartsell,<sup>2</sup> and by James and Wedemeyer.<sup>3</sup>

As shown in a recent SUNY study, however, a majority (52 per cent) of the main reasons for enrolling given by students who had successfully completed independent study courses, focused on the need to obtain academic credit.<sup>4</sup> As reported earlier, only 40 per cent of reasons given by discontinued students centered on academic credit; these findings appear to indicate that having a clear and tangible goal provides a fairly strong source of motivation for independent study.

Appraisal of Study Experience

Material Learned

Respondents were asked whether they felt that they had learned anything from the course; the finding that almost two-thirds said "yes" was not too surprising (Table 7). It should be borne in mind that this item provided one of the few opportunities in the questionnaire for the enrollee to cast himself in a positive light, in contrast to the somewhat negative approach of the other items in calling for an explanation of delinquency. Notwithstanding this fact, these responses do suggest a realization of the value of the course.

Table 7

"Do you Feel That you Have Learned Anything From This Course?"

	<u>Total</u> <u>Respondents</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>
	%	%	%
Yes	63	62	49
No	37	38	51
Totals	100	100	100

Plans to Complete

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they planned to complete the course sometime in the future. Exactly 40 per cent indicated that they planned to finish the course (Table 8). Although these answers may be based more upon wishful thinking than upon concrete planning, they nevertheless reflect a high degree of positive feeling about the course, and suggest a realization of its potential value.

Table 8

"Are you Planning to Complete This Course Sometime in the Future?"

	<u>Total</u> <u>Respondents</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>
	%	%	%
Yes	40	39	41
No	60	61	59
Totals	100	100	100

Lessons Completed

About one-third (34 per cent) of the respondents did not submit any lessons before discontinuing; 75 per cent failed to go beyond the one-quarter point in the number of lessons which were turned in (Table 9). These findings are nearly identical to results obtained in a 1960 research project at the University of Wisconsin.<sup>5</sup>

The data shown in Table 9 tend to suggest that if students turn in more than one-fourth of the lessons, they probably will complete the course. Herein lies an important implication for increasing the completion rate; it appears critical to encourage students during their first stage of study--the inertia of those who failed to make even a beginning most clearly illustrates this.

Table 9

"What Proportion of the Lessons did you Complete?"

	<u>Total Respondents</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>
	%	%	%
None	34	32	35
Less than 1/4	41	41	43
Less than 1/2	13	13	13
Less than 3/4	9	10	7
Almost all	3	4	2
	—	—	—
Totals	100	100	100

Reasons for Discontinuing

Reasons given by enrollees who discontinue often involve rationalizations which make their responses difficult to evaluate. Also, it is recognized that enrollees usually have more than one reason for discontinuing. Other research has shown, however, that an open-end item requesting enrollees to state their main reason will yield valid information.<sup>6</sup>

Each respondent, therefore, was asked to write out his one main reason for discontinuing; only 10 enrollees did not answer this item. Additional reasons for discontinuing were given in reply to a later question which invited respondents to suggest ways of improving the Independent Study Program.

Plan of Presentation

It appeared that clearly identifiable main themes were contained in the overwhelming majority of reasons. Only a small number of respondents seemed to be rationalizing rather than making a sound appraisal of their difficulties. This can be illustrated in such contradictory statements as "The course was too difficult, but I suppose I wasn't up to it."

All of the reasons given by enrollees were grouped into the six categories shown in Table 10; sub-groups of reasons contained within categories are found in the tables in Appendix A.

After analyzing the distribution among categories (Table 10), a sample of the verbatim comments comprising each category will be presented. This sample was chosen to illustrate in both a quantitative and qualitative way the range of comments which were made; therefore, it should be remembered that the comments presented are only a portion of the total responses.

Table 10

Distribution of Reasons for  
Discontinuing, by Category

	<u>Per Cent</u>
Problems involving the instructor and administrative procedures.....	24
Problems involving enrollee's motivation or his learning orientation.....	22
Problems of other demands on enrollee's time.....	19
Problems relating to new developments and changes in the enrollee's plans.....	15
Problems regarding content of the course itself.....	15
Miscellaneous reasons.....	5
Total	<u>100</u>

Overall Distribution  
of Main Reasons

The enrollee's reasons were fairly evenly distributed among five of the six categories (Table 10); in other words, enrollees appear to have a cluster of reasons for discontinuing rather than a single major cause. Of the six categories, five primarily include factors which do not lend themselves to direct control by correspondence instructors or campus administrators. Of all reasons given, however, the one which was mentioned most frequently concerned the instructor's late return of corrected lessons; a situation that is subject to control along with other problems involving campus administrative procedures.

Problems Involving  
the Instructor

One-fourth (24 per cent) of the reasons for discontinuing were grouped into the first category in Table 10. About seven out of every ten reasons in this category related to problems involving the instructor; the remaining reasons related to difficulties involving the campus. For a more detailed analysis, verbatim responses concerning the instructor will be presented separately from those of the campus.

Return of lessons--After completing a number of lessons, I had to wait six weeks for the initial two assignments to be returned. I did not want to go on until the papers were corrected and returned. By the time they were returned I had fallen too far behind to complete the course.

The instructor did not return my lessons promptly; I could not apply his comments to later lessons.

There was a delay in the return of corrected lessons and difficulty in interpreting his comments.

I waited over two months before my instructor returned my first lesson. I have never received my second lesson back, which I mailed in three months ago.

The instructor took from two to three weeks to mail back the lessons. After seeing the length of time it would take me to complete the course, I took the course in the next semester at the college I attended.

I did not receive any corrections or return of the assignments which I sent in; I received no assistance from the instructor.

Could not complete the course due to the long period of time that was being taken for a corrected lesson to be returned. Therefore, I had to take it at a university because time was running out and I needed the course credit. Some lessons took eight weeks before they were corrected; the shortest was four weeks.

The delay in waiting for return of submitted material, and the necessary wait for answers to specific questions dampened my interest. I was accustomed to faster feedback.

In September, 1968 I sent in the first lesson and then waited for four months to get my first lesson back. In addition, illness in my family upset my planned study program.

I became discouraged when lessons were not answered soon. Also, one question asked for a translation in one's own words and the teacher said more outside examples needed to be given. I wonder if the teacher read the question?

The primary reason was failure on the part of the instructor to return my lessons. My first lesson was returned after two and one-half months; only after I sent letters to the instructor and to the director of the correspondence study program.

I was told that the course would be at my speed. After submitting four lessons, one at a time, no corrected lessons were returned to me.

There was much delay in returning my work. The instructor changed during the course and there was a four-month delay before a new instructor was assigned; he also was very slow in returning my work.

Teaching approach used--The degrading comments of the instructor could spur a good student to better work. But for someone like myself who felt unable to compete with young people, who already felt dumb, it was an obstacle I couldn't cope with.

I did not receive the supportive help which the course claims would be given; therefore, I made repeated errors on succeeding lessons and received low grades.

Did not care for my teacher's attitude. He was rude, inconsiderate, and too sarcastic. His degrading attitude not only discourages a student from continuing but it also takes away the pleasure of learning.

I hesitated to submit my assignments because of the harshness of the instructor's comments--"trite" and "garbage" were a few of the remarks which he made.

The instructor was too critical for a correspondence student who is under a handicap. A little encouragement at the very beginning would have helped me to finish the course. I wanted this course and paid money for it.

Teacher not available--There was a lack of interest on the teacher's part, also the teacher was unavailable from January to June.

The teacher was not available for a six-month period, from January to June.

Grading--The instructor had an inconsistent evaluation scale. One week four mistakes was an "A", the next week it was as low as an "F".

#### Discussion: Problems Involving the Instructor

The above comments concerning late return of lessons are further illuminated by the results of a recent study of SUNY students who successfully have completed independent study courses. In the SUNY study, three out of every four students reported that assignments usually were corrected and returned within 20 days.<sup>6</sup> One out of every four enrollees, however, indicated that more than 20 days generally elapsed before assignments were returned.

The following nine campuses were involved in student complaints made about the instructor: Albany; Alfred; Brockport; Farmingdale; Manhattan; Nassau; Orange; and Plattsburgh. The Brockport campus was mentioned more frequently than other colleges. The courses involved at each of these campuses are listed in Appendix Table 1.

Problems Involving  
Administrative Procedures

About three out of every ten reasons grouped into the first category in Table 10 involved problems with administrative procedures; that is, difficulties associated with service provided by the campus. A sample of verbatim comments is listed next.

Delivery of course materials--I didn't receive the materials as of July, 1969. Because I had applied for the course in late April and hoped to finish it before September, I felt it was impossible to wait any longer.

I did not receive the student workbook; I advised the campus of this and was told that a workbook would be sent. I also was informed that the time schedule would not begin until I received the book, but I never received one.

I paid the tuition in early September and received my course materials around November 1. I wasted a lot of valuable time waiting for the course materials to arrive.

I followed instructions by sending in a letter when I was half way through the course and ready for the next book. However, I never received any answer from the campus.

I paid for the course and never received any material; I wrote a few times to the campus and finally had to ask for my money back.

Course was misrepresented--This course was grossly misrepresented in the brochure compared to what it actually was when presented in our local area.

The advertising for the course was quite different from what I found when I actually received it.

Administrative snafu--I was not assigned to an instructor after I enrolled.

Two of my homework assignments which were mailed to the campus were never forwarded to my instructor.

Discussion: Problems  
Involving Administrative  
Procedures

The comments concerning late delivery of course materials take on additional meaning when they are compared to recent research involving students who successfully have completed SUNY correspondence courses. In this research, one out of every two students reported that it generally took more than three weeks from the date of enrollment to receive the course materials.

Campuses involved in student complaints about administrative procedures were: Albany; Binghamton; Brockport; Geneseo; Niagara; Oswego; and Plattsburgh. The specific courses involved at each of these campuses are listed in Appendix Table 2.

Problems Involving the  
Enrollee's Learning  
Orientation

The second category in Table 10 contains 22 per cent of the reasons. About six out of every ten reasons in this category involved the enrollee's learning orientation; these responses will be presented separately from those involving the enrollee's motivation.

-----

I found it too difficult to study independently.

The course needed faculty contact to fully appreciate the materials and course content.

Can't study without the personal touch of the instructor.

This is a difficult way to study, having nobody to discuss problems with.

I felt completely frustrated by this method; I could not remember what I had learned from one lesson to the next.

Decided that I would need the help of an instructor to get through the course.

After reading the first assignment, I decided that I would need personal instruction to pass the course.

Found that I need the opportunity for discussion with other students. I was not able to gain enough insight into the course without having an explanation from the teacher.

I was not able to fully understand the course. When I completed the course on campus, I found that I could follow it completely.

When I had a question, I had no immediate way of getting an answer. The text lacked answers to the questions and problems which had to be submitted.

I felt that I could do better in a course such as calculus with the help of an instructor; therefore, I dropped out and enrolled in the same course on campus.

This is a depersonalized way to study; it is hard to develop communication between the teacher and student.

I concluded that classroom attendance would be better for me.

Was taking too much time submitting my papers because I could not find the explanation alone.

Problems Involving the  
Enrollee's Motivation

Approximately four out of every ten comments grouped into the second category in Table 10 related to the lack of student motivation. Following is a sample of the verbatim comments made.

-----

I didn't have the self-discipline which is required.

Experienced a lack of self-discipline and I find it easier to get the work done when I have fixed deadlines.

Did not have enough self-discipline to study on my own.

I was too lazy.

Did not desire to do the work.

Had a lack of interest and ambition.

I didn't have enough motivation to do the work when there was no chance of participating in class discussion.

Problems of Other Demands  
on Enrollee's Time

As indicated in Table 10, time problems accounted for 19 per cent of the reasons given for discontinuing. A sample of verbatim comments considered to be representative is listed next.

Full-time responsibilities--During the year I had a full-time teaching position and I attended school during the summer. We sold our house and bought a new one and I have three young sons and no one else to help me.

I was working around the clock, and didn't have the time to complete the course.

I am a youth leader, also I work 330 days out of 365. I did not have enough time to devote to my study.

As a full-time teacher and coach of girls' sports I found that the time necessary to spend on the course was lacking.

In addition to a full-time job, there was the pressure of family duties. Due to a period of ill health and more pressing schedule, I could not find the necessary time to complete the course.

I undertook the course during the summer while I was working 16 hours a day helping my mother in her restaurant; did not have the time to continue the course and give it the attention it needed.

I went back to work full-time and didn't have the time to work on the course.

General reasons--I was trying to do too many things at one time.

There simply wasn't enough time to finish.

I didn't have enough free time to complete the course within the allotted period for completion.

Am enrolled in a nursing program and couldn't find the time to complete the course.

My business venture did not allow me enough time.

We are moving and I didn't have time to do the work.

I work part-time and attend an evening class one night a week; I found that more time was required than I was able to devote to the course.

Could not get the work done which was assigned.

I attend high school and found that I could not handle both work loads. The course required too much time and my high school work came first.

I work 45 hours per week; in addition I run a small business, and also have been helping a sick relative a bit. There were not enough minutes per hour and not enough hours per day. I still read the text and related materials whenever I find even a few minutes.

Home and personal reasons--The pressure of family and personal affairs left no time for study.

With four small children at home, the amount of time I could devote to the course was not sufficient.

I found it difficult to find the time to take two courses during the summer and to tend to three children at the same time.

My new baby required too much time to continue with my outside activities.

Problems Relating to new  
Developments and Changes  
in the Enrollee's Plans

About 15 per cent of the reasons given for discontinuing were grouped into this category (Table 10). A sample of verbatim comments follows.

Changes in enrollee's plans--I decided to take a second job during the evening and Saturdays.

Decided not to enter the teaching profession at the high school level.

Made a decision to go on to graduate school instead.

Have enrolled in another university and am now taking 15 full-time credits.

I am now a full-time graduate student and I am taking the course on campus.

Because of a period of bad health, my plans have shifted to obtaining an AB degree instead.

Other concerns have become more important and I am no longer interested in preparing for graduate school.

Have enrolled instead in a community college and now attend evening classes.

My plans have changed due to health reasons.

Decided to enroll in evening school to finish the course.

My plans have changed due to a change in employment.

I have enrolled full-time in college and am now able to take courses faster.

Other developments--I became quite ill during the birth of my child; I could not fulfill the requirements and, therefore, I could not attain the satisfaction that I would like to from the course.

Because of a death in the family I was unable to concentrate on the course and I was unable to give it the attention which it needed.

I changed my major and, therefore, no longer need this particular course.

My mother died and I acquired other responsibilities which I had to attend to.

I was readmitted back into school and was required to take the course at this particular school.

I decided to be married after enrolling in the course, and I have since started graduate work on campus.

I now have added responsibilities and do not have time for the course.

We bought another house which needed a lot of minor improvements and I decided to work on this.

Problems Related  
to Course Content

About 15 per cent of the reasons given for discontinuing involved problems with the content of the course itself (Table 10). A sample considered representative of the verbatim responses is presented next.

General problems--It was not the type of material which would meet my needs.

I found the subject matter irritating.

The textbook has to be both the instructor and reference library; the text did not give enough information or detailed examples.

The assignments in the study guide were unreasonable.

I thought the course would be more advanced but it was more elementary than high school. I felt it would be a waste of both my time and the professors' to complete the course; the professor expected quite elementary answers.

The course was not what I expected it to be. I was looking for a course on sentence structure, proper grammar and effective business writing.

I did not feel that the content of this course was one suited to correspondence. This course was one mainly of statistics and class participation seemed necessary.

I found the course to be less interesting, and dryer than expected.

I don't feel that a statistics course is really applicable to the correspondence method. I could do the lessons but I didn't really understand them without having the teacher's personal explanation.

Course was too difficult--The course materials were too difficult to follow.

The content of this course was too difficult without having direct contact with the teacher.

The course was too hard for me.

I could not work the problems assigned; they were too difficult.

The questions found in the study guide were so difficult and involved that I became discouraged.

Too much content was included--This course covered at least three times as much material as a similar course taken in the classroom.

There were too many assignments to endure.

I found it impossible to cover so much subject matter.

#### Miscellaneous Reasons

About 5 per cent of the respondents gave reasons for discontinuing which did not fit into the previous five categories (Table 10). A sample considered representative of the reasons placed into this category is listed next.

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I was able to meet the certification requirements without having the course.

The certification requirements were changed and I no longer needed the course to make up for a lack of undergraduate math credits.

I no longer need the course because the college will now accept the "D" I received in a previous course for transfer credit.

My curiosity was satisfied; what I thought was good work rated poor marks and what I thought was poor work rated good marks.

There were insufficient funds to cover my check. I also paid something like \$13.00 for a textbook that looked like it was used in 1930. The age of the book is not the dispute, it is the price.

I had no other choice at the time I enrolled, however, I have now been accepted at a new community college.

I took the course as a refresher for the civil service exam; after I passed the exam I had no reason to complete the course.

I did not know I had discontinued until I received your questionnaire. There was no notice given to extend. It is my interest to try to be reinstated.

I couldn't find the library resources to do a good job in completing the assignments.

### Suggestions for Improvement

An open-end question invited respondents to suggest ways of improving the Independent Study Program. About one out of every ten respondents used this opportunity to make favorable comments, which usually concerned the quality of the course or the educational opportunity which correspondence study affords.

Forty-eight per cent did not answer this item; that is, they did not make any comments. The remaining 42 per cent made one or more suggestions. These were grouped into the main themes listed below; to the right of each main theme is a figure indicating the number of times it was mentioned.

---

Overall administration needs to be improved; more coordination between the instructor and campus is required. . . . .	10
Instructor who is motivated and sympathetic to the needs of correspondence study students is required. . . . .	9
Instructor should be required to return corrected lessons within a specified period of time. . . . .	7
Study guide materials should be presented in a better way. . . . .	6
Textbook which is easier to understand is needed. . . . .	6
More opportunities for counseling are needed; these should be available at the nearest SUNY campus, regardless of where the student is enrolled. . . . .	6

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Shorter assignments are needed. . . . .	6
Amount of content to be covered in the course should be reduced. . . . .	5
Campus should provide a reminder notice concerning the expiration date for the course enrollment. . . . .	5
Student should be allowed to extend his enrollment without payment of fee. . . . .	3
A newsletter periodically should be mailed to correspondence study students. . . . .	3
A list of students in my area who are taking the same correspondence course should be provided. . . . .	3
An opportunity for a pre-enrollment interview with the instructor should be provided. . . . .	3
A brochure should be developed on how to study for correspondence study courses. . . . .	2
Full refund should be provided if no lessons have been submitted. . . . .	2
Tuition for correspondence courses should be reduced. . . . .	2
Students should be permitted to return used textbooks for a refund. . . . .	2
Better instructions for mailing lessons and for taking examinations are needed. . . . .	1
Campus or college newsletter should be mailed to correspondence study students. . . . .	1
Forms to extend the course enrollment routinely should be mailed to the student at the end of 12 months. . . . .	1
Graduate students shouldn't be allowed to correct lessons. . . . .	1

Instructor should be assigned to teach correspondence students as a full-time responsibility. . . . .	1
Do not list courses in promotion brochures if instructors are not available. . . . .	1
Recordings should be used to supplement written materials. . . . .	1
Full refund should be provided if the instructor disappears or terminates his employment. . . . .	1
Two years of original time should be granted to complete a course. . . . .	1

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

### What has the Student Gained?

Certain general conclusions are suggested by the data presented. One gets the definite impression that, for a large majority of the enrollees, the course has by no means been without value. The overwhelming majority who indicated that they had learned something from the course testifies to this fact. This is true even after realizing that many of these replies must have been influenced by the psychological difficulty involved in acknowledging that effort has been expended without reward. Although course completion is only one criterion for appraising the value of the course to the student, the sizable number of students who enrolled to obtain academic credit have certainly fallen short of their goal.

### Implications for Increasing the Completion Rate

The study's findings have implications for the direction and nature of the steps which might be taken to increase the completion rate. At present, rough indications of the strength of motivation for completion can be inferred from the stated reasons for enrolling. The students who may have the strongest interest, for example, certainly include but are not limited to those interested in obtaining academic credit. Campus administrators should remember this when formulating letters and other communications to motivate enrollees; an effort to motivate enrollees according to their expressed interest would seem to be an effective communications approach.

In addition, the timing of communications which campuses use to motivate students must be considered. It appears critical to encourage enrollees during their early months of study; the fact that one-third failed to send in any lessons clearly illustrates this point.

### Attacking the Obstacles to Completion

The solutions to the six categories of problems can be seen in outline, although they are not so easily brought about. The findings, therefore, raise the question of how to mount

a more direct attack upon the problems which have been brought to light.

Problems involving the instructor and administrative procedures were the most important in frequency. Although these problems appear correctable, they fall largely outside of the direct control of the Central Office for Continuing Education. In many cases, the existence of these problems involves a lack of campus support for the Independent Study Program, with a consequent failure to provide both the dedicated faculty and administrative concern necessary for a successful program. General improvement, therefore, is needed in the total effort of both campus administrators and instructors to serve the correspondence student.

The late return of lessons should be a priority item for a plan of corrective action taken by campuses; it is obvious that this has had a very negative effect on the enrollee's motivation. Another priority item for campuses should be an examination of their total communications effort. Enrollees should receive several communications from the campus to supplement or reinforce the interaction between instructor and student; a need underscored by a recent study of SUNY students who successfully have completed correspondence work. This research indicated that two out of every three enrollees received no communications from the campus to motivate them in their study.<sup>8</sup>

The finding that time problems were important is both encouraging and discouraging. It is encouraging in the limited negative sense of indicating that there is no serious fault in the Independent Study Program which constitutes a barrier to a higher completion rate. But it is also discouraging because the kinds of time problems comprising this category are ones which essentially can be only resolved by the enrollee. Very few of those who presented time problems suggest that a solution could be brought about by an extension of the one-year of original time granted to complete. The question, therefore, becomes not so much one of what can be done to prevent them, but rather, to what extent can they be foreseen and incorporated into the students' planning.

Herein is found an inherent problem of the independent study method in that it often is not feasible to give pre-enrollment counseling. Oftentimes, however, the campus advisor could be

of assistance in helping the prospective enrollee to take a more realistic look at his time requirements. Furthermore, it is quite likely that some of the lack of foresight which gave rise to time problems stems from a lack of information about the demands which correspondence study would make. Again, the campus advisor could be of help by giving the prospective enrollee a realistic picture of the time which the course requires, so that he may be somewhat better able to determine whether he can fit it into his schedule.

Problems with the course itself fall almost entirely within the scope of concerns which could be eliminated by more effective counseling, both prior to enrollment and during the students' progress in the course. Also, difficulties involving new developments and changes in the enrollee's plans deserve special attention because the number of such problems probably could be greatly reduced by student counseling. It is true, of course, that many of the problems of changed interest, and plans will always occur. Changes in college and career plans, for example, are bound to occur frequently in young age groups. It is probably true that acquaintance with the subject matter through correspondence often serves the useful purpose of allowing the enrollee to discover at an early date that certain career fields are not appropriate for him. In this case, counseling would be valuable to encourage the student to change his enrollment to a course that fits his new needs.

END NOTES

1. Denver Sloan, Survey Study of Correspondence Dropouts and Cancellations (University of Kentucky Extension Publication, 1965), p. 8.
2. Charles Hartsell, "Correspondence Dropouts: Why? Adult Leadership (November, 1964), p. 156.
3. Bernard J. James and Charles A. Wedemeyer, "Completion of University Correspondence Courses by Adults," The Home Study Review (Summer, 1960, pp. 13-20.
4. Central Office for Continuing Education, "Reaction of SUNY Students Toward Independent Study Courses," (State University of New York, 1969), Table 3, p. 3.
5. James and Wedemeyer, op. cit., p. 18.
6. Central Office for Continuing Education, op. cit., Table 13, p. 11.
7. Ibid., Table 12, p. 10.
8. Ibid., Table 14, p. 12.

A P P E N D I X A

T A B L E 1

Complaints Involving the Instructor,  
Classified by Campus

<u>Campus</u>	<u>Course Involved</u>
Albany	Business 56
Alfred	Business 58
Alfred	English (Fresh.)
Brockport	English
Brockport	Economics (Intro.)
Brockport	Philosophy 76
Brockport	Geology 54
Brockport	Sociology 36
Farmingdale	European History
Manhattan	English 1
Nassau	Psychology 61
Nassau	Accounting 1
Nassau	English 101
Nassau	Sociology 36
Orange	History 2
Oswego	Anal.-Geometry
Plattsburgh	Economics 1

Regarding each of the above campuses, one or more complaints were made about the instructional services provided.

T A B L E 2

Complaints Involving Administrative  
Procedures, Classified by Campus

<u>Campus</u>	<u>Course Involved</u>
Albany	Economics
Binghamton	Humanities
Brockport	Amer. History 11
Brockport	Psychology 61
Geneseo	Philosophy 76
Niagara	Shakespeare
Oswego	Sociology
Plattsburgh	Business 56

For each campus above, one or more complaints were made about the administrative services provided.

T A B L E 3

Sub-Categories of Reasons Pertaining  
to the Instructor and Administrative  
Procedures, Listed in Decreasing  
Order of Frequency

Sub-Categories

1. Late return of lessons
2. Poor teaching approach used.
3. Late delivery of course materials
4. Course was misrepresented in the promotional materials.
5. Teacher was not available.
6. Administrative snafu could not be resolved.
7. Grading standards were inconsistent.

T A B L E 4

Sub-Categories of Reasons Pertaining to the  
Enrollee's Learning Orientation and  
the Enrollee's Motivation, Listed in  
Decreasing Order of Frequency.

Sub-Categories

1. Can't learn effectively by the correspondence study method.
2. Lack of self-discipline.
3. Didn't have the proper educational background.

