

Sources of Support for Women Taking Professional Programs by Distance Education

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Abstract

Women with multiple roles face many challenges when taking distance education courses in professional programs to achieve credentials or maintain competence. Among these challenges is finding the supports necessary for success as a distance student. As part of a larger study on advantages and stressors identified by such women in distance education professional programs, supports from family, educational institutions (especially teaching staff), and employers emerged as important factors for women successfully adding the role of student to their busy lives. Twenty-five women in nursing, health studies, and accounting programs were interviewed, and 573 women in accounting, health studies, nursing, business administration, and education programs completed an online survey. Respondents identified challenges they faced and supports they considered important and received. Respondents managed a mean of six roles in addition to being students. Most worked full time and had partners and children. In the educational institution, support from the instructor or tutor was seen as most important. In the family, spousal supports followed by support from children were essential. Other family members, employers, fellow students, and institutional administrators also played a part in students' success.

Résumé

Les femmes exerçant des rôles multiples font face à de nombreuses difficultés, lorsqu'elles suivent des cours d'éducation à distance dans des programmes professionnels, pour recevoir leur diplôme ou préserver leur compétence. Parmi ces défis, mentionnons la recherche du soutien nécessaire pour connaître des succès comme étudiant à distance. Il s'agit d'une partie d'une étude plus large des avantages et agents stressants identifiés par ces femmes dans des programmes professionnels d'éducation à distance, soutiens de famille, institutions éducatives (surtout le personnel enseignant), et les employeurs, de laquelle ont émergé des facteurs importants pour les femmes associant avec succès le rôle d'étudiante à leur vie active. Vingt-cinq femmes en techniques infirmières, études de santé et programmes de comptabilité ont été interviewées, et 573 femmes en comptabilité, études médicales, techniques infirmières, administration commerciale et programmes d'éducation ont rempli le sondage en ligne. Les répondantes ont identifié les défis auxquelles elles ont fait face et les soutiens qu'elle considéraient importants et reçus. Les répondantes ont joué en moyenne six rôles en plus d'être

étudiantes. La plupart travaillaient à temps plein et avaient des partenaires et des enfants. Dans l'institution éducative, le soutien pour l'instructeur ou le tuteur a été considéré comme le plus important. Dans la famille, le soutien de l'époux, suivi de l'appui des enfants ont été essentiels. D'autres membres de la famille, des employeurs, étudiants, collègues et administrateurs institutionnels ont également joué un rôle dans le succès des étudiantes.

Adults in North American society play many roles: worker, spouse, parent, caregiver, volunteer, and frequently learner. Because women tend to assume the primary child care and homemaking roles, they are particularly vulnerable to negative effects of adding a new role such as student to their already busy lives. Women in professions face particular pressure because of expectations from professional organizations, licensing bodies, and the public that they will maintain professional competence throughout their careers. One way of accomplishing this is by participating in educational opportunities.

Before the development of more flexible access to learning opportunities through distance education, women with obligations to careers, families, and community activities had difficulty participating in either entry-level or continuing professional education because they were not free to relocate or travel to attend educational institutions. Distance education in its various forms is becoming an important source of academic upgrading and continuing education for all professionals. It is often identified as a panacea for women and other adult learners because they can overcome geographic and other barriers that prevent them from physically attending universities or other postsecondary educational institutions to study in traditionally delivered programs. It is assumed that offering educational opportunities where learners live and work enables them more easily to meet their work and family obligations as they study. Therefore, professional associations, universities, and commercial providers are increasingly relying on distance education. However, making the student role more accessible may not be as easy an option for women who already shoulder a number of roles in the family and society.

In the last three decades, distance education has increased accessibility, and in most programs students have considerable control over the timing of their studies. With the barriers of travel and relocation removed, women in particular are freer to add the student role to their many others. Some may feel pressured to do so, but improved access to educational programs can reduce the stress of meeting professional obligations and promote lifelong learning. Supports from family, friends, employers, and educational institutions are essential for women to overcome burdens and succeed in professional education programs. Learning what supports distance learners require can help reduce barriers that women face. In this

article we explore support for women with multiple roles in distance-delivered professional programs.

Literature Review

Women's participation in the paid labor force has increased dramatically over the last three decades and has resulted in a great expansion of roles for women. Social scientists have focused attention on the effect employment has on women's well-being (Long & Kahn, 1993). Sears and Galambos (1993) assumed that paid work brought new sets of stresses into women's lives and could be associated with negative health outcomes. The literature is replete with research from the 1980s and early 1990s focused on the effect of multiple roles on women's well-being. Fulfilling multiple roles places enormous demands on women's time and energy. Repetti (1987) noted that even at peak capacity, women must make complex trade-offs among various roles. The inevitability of role conflict is underlined by the little recognized fact that for women participation in the labor force peaks in the 25-44-year age group, which is also the age when women have the most demanding child care responsibilities. However, research also indicates that multiple roles can confer benefits to women's physical and psychological health (Barnett, 1993; Barnett & Marshall, 1991; Green & Russo, 1993; Sears & Galambos, 1993; Yee, 2000). The effect of a woman's work on the health and well-being of her children and family is complex and involves a potential for both positive and negative effects. Crosby (1991) suggested that women who juggle multiple roles should not blame themselves for difficulties they experience or be discouraged from maintaining these roles. Instead she advocates looking for ways to change the conditions in which women are combining multiple roles.

Stress was one of the major health concerns of the late 20th century (Gwyther, 1999). The literature on stress suggests that working women are prone to the same stressors as are experienced by working men. As Lingren (1998) pointed out,

Balancing work and family is both a female and male issue. It's much like trying to juggle balls of many different colors and sizes. Often a person isn't sure how many are up in the air, or what color or size they are, or which to catch next. (p. 2)

Any social role, marital, occupational, or parental, can serve as both a source of support and a source of stress (Home, 1997; Pearlin, 1982, 1985). Repetti (1987) hypothesized that greater psychological distress is found among employed women who describe their interaction at home and on the job as confrontational and nonsupportive and who are dissatisfied with their work and family roles. With regard to occupational stress, Adams, King, and King (1996) postulated that family involvement and

higher levels of social support create high levels of life satisfaction. The presence of spousal support also has been identified as a critical factor in coping successfully with multiple roles (Scarr, Phillips, & McCartney, 1989).

Compared with their male counterparts, professional women have different and additional stresses to cope with, and this can vary among types of professions. In a survey of 10,000 employed engineers conducted by the Ontario Professional Engineering Association, women reported that they were not given equal access to field assignments, high-profile assignments, promotion to management, and other forms of recognition (Sheridan-Eng, 1996). The report noted that men and women indicated the same level of job stress in the first five years of their engineering careers, but that women experienced a higher stress level with more than five years in the profession.

In a qualitative study about motivational forces influencing 29 students who participated in post-registration nursing degree courses, Dowswell, Hewison, and Hinds (1998) found that almost half the respondents noted that home and family life were affected negatively and that financial pressures added to their strain. Similar results were found in a study of 89 students, of whom 81 were women and the majority of whom were employed full time (82%) while continuing their education (Dowswell, Bradshaw, & Hewison, 2000). Of the women, 61% were nurses, and 44% had children. These researchers found that for 55% of participants, taking courses had a negative effect on family life and relationships. Guilt was also associated with parental roles. Household responsibilities were also affected (69%) as personal standards had slipped or been abandoned.

In a comparative study of mature students ($N=278$; 82% women) completing undergraduate nursing education, Cuthbertson, Lauder, Steele Cleary, and Bradshaw (2004), financial difficulties as well as child and elder care were identified as concerns, where 57.1% of participants identified family problems and elder care and 57.1% noted family problems. Oehlkers and Gibson (2001), in their qualitative study of 16 nurses returning to obtain baccalaureate degrees, identified the need for support from the educational institution as well as from family, friends, peers, workplace, and learners.

Research about supports for students, particularly women, in distance education courses is limited (Earwalker, as cited in Lawton, 1997), and dated (Pym, 1992). As Burge (1990, citing Lohnes, 1987, and Johnson, 1988) suggested, even where home support is available, "the multiple demands of home, work, study and community responsibilities still require sustained energy and finely tuned organizational skills as student stories attest" (p. 13). Because distance education students study predominantly at home, family and friends can be either a great source of support or a

significant barrier to participation in distance learning. For example, women enrolled in distance education programs could be perceived as threatening to the existing order. Faith (1988) wrote:

Although it is likely that most men, as well as women, are supportive of their spouse's educational aspirations, several female adult students reported to me that their mates have refused to accommodate their need for quiet study time. Colleagues tell me about extreme cases where women's husbands have hidden or damaged their study materials and assignments in efforts to sabotage their educational ambitions. (p. 11)

Methodology

We conducted a two-phase study to identify the advantages and stressors experienced by women with multiple roles who were using distance education in postsecondary professional education programs. In the first phase, qualitative descriptive methodology was used to elicit the perceptions of 25 women in post-diploma baccalaureate nursing, Master of Health Studies, and entry-level accounting programs. They were volunteers recruited from three provider institutions through professors' posting of an introductory letter and contact information on course Web sites. In taped telephone interviews, the participants were asked to describe their program, discuss their experiences and preferences in distance learning, their roles and responsibilities over and above those of student, and the effect of adding the distance student role to their lives. Students were in programs that used mainly online methods including computer-based discussion, but some experienced teleconferencing where students met in small groups at sites distant from the professor. Using constant comparative analysis, we identified from the interview transcripts a number of themes, one of which was the need for support.

Based on the data from phase 1, a survey was developed that reflected the information gleaned from respondents. As well as demographic data the survey included subscales for support, experience and preferences with distance education, health effects, family life, and a modification of the House and Rizzo (1972) scale for anxiety and stress. Support questions included Likert scales for identifying the importance of support from various sources; the type of support received; and preferred means of communication with the educational institution, teachers, and fellow students. In Phase 2, the survey was posted on line and female students from programs in accountancy, health studies, nursing, education, and business administration were invited to participate. The professional association provided the accountancy program. Five Canadian universities that agreed to participate in the study provided the other programs. Professors were asked to inform the female students in their course about the survey Web site through their normal communication channels. One nursing

group received the survey by mail. Responses were received from 573 women studying in these professional programs. Most were studying in online courses that included varying amounts of online interaction. Forty-seven students were studying by teleconference. The 231 (57% of respondents) accountancy students had access to face-to-face sessions if they lived near a major population area, but few reported participating in these classes. Survey responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics including correlations among subscales identified in the instrument. Both phases generated large amounts of rich data about students' experiences as distance learners in various types of programs. The results of the entire study will be published elsewhere. In this article, we focus on the responses provided by participants in phases 1 and 2 about the supports from family, friends, employers, and educational institutions that they considered important, the supports they reported they received, and relationships between support and other factors in the survey subscales.

Results

Participants

In reporting results, percentages of those providing a given answer are reported along with how many respondents provided that answer ($n=$), because the number to responding to each question varied. The 25 participants in phase 1 ranged in age from 27 to 53 years. Five hundred, seventy-three women completed the survey as part of phase 2. They ranged in age from almost 25 to 55 years with 77% ($n=332$) under 45.

Respondents from both phases were clearly women with multiple roles. All 25 of those in phase 1, mostly full time (72%, $n=18$), had a number of other household, family, and community responsibilities. In phase 2, the mean number of roles in addition to student was six, and most (95%) of these women identified five or more roles in addition to that of student. Ninety percent worked full time; 71% were married; 48% had dependent children; and 12% had elder care responsibilities. Forty-five percent engaged in pet care, sometimes with pets as large and demanding as horses, and 21% reported community work. The majority (87%) were part-time students, 18% of whom reported that they had been in their respective programs for more than five years.

Sources of Support

In the qualitative study, the women talked frequently about the supports they needed to succeed as distance students and those they actually received. Family relationships were particularly important. Being wives and mothers involved in higher education had an effect on family life. Husbands in particular assumed more household responsibilities, and children had to adjust to their mother being less available to them.

Relationships with friends and extended family were often described as being on hold for the duration of the program.

Survey participants provided responses about supports on Likert scales ranging from 1-5 with 5 being the most positive. Questions focused on the importance of support; actual support received; students' methods and reasons for accessing supports from the educational institution, tutors, and fellow students; as well as satisfaction with supports received. Participants also answered open-ended questions. We use excerpts from both phases of the study to illustrate support factors these women identified as important.

Supports: Importance and Amount Received

Survey respondents were asked to identify how important it was for them to receive supports for distance education studies from various sources (Tables 1 and 2). Supports attributed scores with highest importance were for tutors/instructors, spouses, and children. Spouses scored highest, followed by children and immediate work supervisors. Least important scores were for university administration, other students, and friends, although all scores were above 3 (neutral). University administration and tutors/instructors were identified as providing the least actual support. One participant noted, "This is a very lonely, long process. It is difficult for people not directly involved to understand how demanding it really is. They may intend to be supportive, but it can rarely be enough!"

Supports from the educational institution. Support from tutor/instructors was rated as most important, probably because of the teacher's contribution to the student's success in the course. Greatest contact and interac-

Table 1
Importance of Receiving Supports for Distance Education Studies

Source	N	Min*	Max*	Mean	SD	%=4 & 5
Tutors/instructors	539	1	5	4.41	.86	87
University administration	450	1	5	3.66	1.03	50
Other students	519	1	5	3.68	1.14	63
Spouse/significant other	462	1	5	4.53	.91	88
Children	314	1	5	4.33	1.04	83
Other family members	451	1	5	3.90	1.14	70
Friends	494	1	5	3.72	1.06	66
Work colleagues	514	1	5	3.99	.98	77
Immediate work supervisor	500	1	5	4.34	.90	88
Employer/upper management	506	1	5	4.25	.92	85
Valid N (listwise)	214					

*1=very unimportant, 5=very important.

Table 2
Actual Support for Distance Education Studies Received

Source	N	Min*	Max*	Mean	SD	%=4 & 5*
Tutors/instructors	476	1	5	3.66	1.04	62
University administration	333	1	5	3.33	1.12	49
Other students	388	1	5	3.72	.94	67
Spouse/significant other	434	1	5	4.26	.98	84
Children	287	1	5	4.01	.98	74
Other family members	406	1	5	3.89	1.05	71
Friends	440	1	5	3.80	.94	70
Work colleagues	468	1	5	3.77	.96	69
Immediate work supervisor	458	1	5	3.93	1.08	73
Employer/upper management	462	1	5	3.82	1.07	67
Valid N (listwise)	110					

*1=very poor, 5=excellent.

tion with the institution and the course was through the tutor/instructor. It is reasonable to suggest that lack of direct interaction could have implications for the student's ability to assess program and course expectations.

The respondents' preferred method of accessing tutor/instructors in their distance education program was e-mail (89%, $n=498$), with telephone (37%, $n=208$) being the next most preferred method. E-mail was seen as the easiest means of contacting tutor/instructors ($M=4.2$, $SD=1.03$), followed by computer conferencing ($M=3.77$, $SD=1.24$). E-mail was also rated as the method having the highest quality of interaction ($n=476$, $M=4.05$, $SD=1.02$). Eighty percent ($n=381$) scored the quality of e-mail interaction as 4 or 5. Fewer students rated the quality of computer conferencing ($n=156$), but those who did rate it gave it second place ($n=112$, $M=3.90$, $SD=1.11$, 72% scoring 4 and 5). The ratings for actual support received from tutor/instructors were less ($n=476$, $M=3.66$, $SD=1.04$) than those for importance ($n=539$, $M=4.41$, $SD=.86$). Students' comments suggest that the difference may be attributed to their unsuccessful attempts to interact with their teachers, despite their clear satisfaction with e-mail as a means of communication. Various students commented:

The program makes it difficult to access tutors and markers do not answer questions. They prefer that you contact tutors by e-mail but by the time a response is received, the assignment is done. You really have to weigh whether it is worth the effort;

Contact with the people who mark assignments is very unsatisfactory. They're the ones who provide the most feedback (one sided), because they

mark the submitted assignments but there is very little opportunity to get more clarification/details in order to be able to improve;

Some of the tutors that mark our assignments are very sarcastic. When you get a question wrong, they tend to berate you for it.

Support from university administration ranked among the lowest for importance and for actual support received among the survey group. When rating various types of administrative assistance received, only access to course materials had a mean rating of more than 4 ($M=4.05$, $SD=1.05$, $N=544$). Registration ($M=3.87$, $SD .95$, $N=531$) and help desk ($M=3.70$, $SD 1.01$, $N=427$) received the next most positive ratings. Financial aid was lowest at 2.20 ($N=122$, $SD 1.25$). Student advising was rated next lowest at 3.08 ($N=299$, $SD 1.23$), with orientation to the technology and the academic program scoring similarly at 3.25 ($N=462$, $SD 1.07$) and 3.28 ($N=461$, $SD 1.05$) respectively. In the qualitative study, it was also clear that some students had difficulties with program expectations and structure: "I really didn't feel well supported. Perhaps I didn't ask for much help. Frequently I didn't know where to go for help"; "I didn't receive an introduction to the program and I made a lot of mistakes because I did not know the system." Programs were changed without students being informed, a particularly unfortunate circumstance for part-time students who take several years to complete programs as changes during their enrollment period are almost inevitable. However, few mechanisms for keeping students up to date with changes in requirements, courses, and programs were noted. "Information that should go out to everyone is sometimes lacking. I routinely get e-mails about social events, special functions, etc. but last year I was not told that my exam had been relocated to another centre."

Supports from fellow students. The survey participants saw other students as among their least important source of support. Many students were in programs that encouraged little direct interaction or contact with other students. Some reported that unless they went to optional face-to-face sessions, they had no idea who else was taking the course.

I don't know anyone else taking this course. It would be helpful to add your name to a registry of students to facilitate learning. There may be students who want to ask a question of someone who is doing the same work/course and confer with each other over homework assignments.

They looked to fellow students for academic, not personal support, and they preferred e-mail as the means of contacting each other:

I haven't had much communication with others due to lack of time and ability to organize meeting times. This is due to excessive work demands

(45-70 hours per week) and demands of raising 2 children and maintaining a household on my own.

Group work was perceived negatively. Although students might wish to interact, they did not wish to be forced to do so, especially across time zones.

I find group work a problem because of the distance and time zones. Currently I have a group project with [students] in Northern Ontario and Lebanon. As we all work full-time, it is difficult to coordinate projects with people that we don't know, and cannot get together with. This is my biggest stressor for the whole program.

Students in the teleconference program that required weekly small-group meetings did not provide significantly different responses from those who experienced more isolating delivery methods.

Supports from family. Women who were married or living with a partner predominated in this group ($n=406$, 71%). Only 10% ($n=56$) of the survey respondents reported being divorced or separated. Spouses were rated as the most important support in the home context, as well as the most actually supportive group (Tables 1 and 2). Working things out with the partner to ensure that household tasks were done, that children were cared for, and that some modicum of social life was preserved required negotiation with the spouse. Some families reapportioned tasks, some hired household help, but other relationships deteriorated into bickering and breakup. Ninety percent ($n=413$) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their spouses were proud of them for pursuing distance education. However, 42% ($n=196$) agreed or strongly agreed that their spousal/partner relationship had been negatively affected by their studies; 38% ($n=129$) agreed or strongly agreed that their spouse resented the time they spent on studies. "My biggest concern is the roadblocks my husband creates that interfere with my studies. He would rather see me spend more time with him, but it is important to me to have an education." Nevertheless, spousal/partner support was a key element in the students' success. "Although my spouse couldn't relate to my reasons for completing these studies, he was, nonetheless, very supportive." The fact that the student could learn at home instead of traveling helped to preserve the family unit, but 65% ($n=349$) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, "I have sufficient time to spend with my family."

Children's support was also important. Sixty-nine percent ($n=215$) of mothers agreed or strongly agreed that their children were proud of them for pursuing distance education. Eighty-six percent ($n=248$) agreed or strongly agreed that their studies had contributed to being a better role model for children.

My son and I have often spent time at the dining room table doing our homework together. I think it has had a positive effect on his outlook towards school and the fact that learning does not end with grade 12.

However, 35% ($n=112$) agreed or strongly agreed that relationships with children had been negatively affected. Accommodations had to be made to get the chores done, get children to their appointments, and preserve some family interaction.

Support of members of the extended family and friends was seen as less important to the students, although they were still sources of support. Relationships with friends were reported as having been negatively affected ($n=245$, 47%). "My family is very understanding, but my friends don't share our enthusiasm and at times I feel their resentment over my accomplishments causing more strain on our friendship." Students spoke of putting their lives on hold for the duration of the program, and social interaction with extended family and friends was frequently the area that was cut back. Seventy percent ($n=371$) disagreed or strongly disagreed that they had enough time to enjoy social activities. At least on a temporary basis, many aspects of social and family life were negatively affected by the woman's student status.

Household responsibilities. Many of the written comments on the survey indicated that participants felt they were personally responsible for a number of household tasks. As these slid, they expressed a certain amount of guilt. Some spouses and children took on additional roles.

While I'm taking a course, my husband has to take over the laundry, cooking and cleaning that I normally do in addition to the vacuuming, household maintenance and cleaning he usually does. I could not do this course without his support.

However, even the woman who reported that her unemployed husband had assumed most household tasks had retained responsibility for the laundry. Some women lowered their standards of housekeeping. "Something has to give for study time. In my house everyone wears wrinkled clothes. They are clean, but wrinkled!" Because these were working, professional women with good incomes, several reported that they were able to buy services for what they could no longer manage themselves.

I spend money on things I could do myself, because the strain of doing everything would be the last straw. I now have a cleaning lady, and I am constantly using services I never did before. Before this I never paid anyone to cut the grass, do mending, or wrap gifts.... We cannot really afford these services, but life would be intolerable for everyone if chores became a point of conflict.

Workplace support. Because virtually all respondents were employed, support from the workplace was an important factor, but not at the levels of educational institution and family support. Some students received support in the form of time off for study, financial reimbursement, and recognition. "My place of work has funded most of the program I am taking and provides time off of work for purposes of study. It doesn't get much better than this." Several were in positions that required the credential for which they were studying and received considerable latitude to achieve the employer's criteria. "My supervisor is very accommodating when I request time off to study and my employer actively supports continuing education of all employees through the Education Assistance program." Others met opposition and roadblocks from colleagues and supervisors. "Although a requirement in my current position, there is little or no support from my boss."

Summary of support sources. Throughout both phases of the study, women repeatedly reported how overworked they felt and how they had had to reappportion their priorities and time to accommodate the student role. They were able to succeed because they were given support from many sources.

Support is everything. All of us (women) have so many other family commitments that having supportive families and friends as well as co-workers and bosses can mean the difference between succeeding and deciding to end your studies without completing them.

Correlations Between Support Subscales and Other Factors.

In the survey, a Global Support Received Scale (10 items, $\alpha=0.85$) was identified (Table 3). Composite variables for supports received from fami-

Table 3
Composite Variables: Support

	<i>Items</i>	<i>Alpha</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Global Support composite variable	10	0.856	113	1.00	4.70	3.6416	.6951
Family Support composite variable	9	0.8136	227	1.56	5.00	3.8243	.7117
Support from Friends composite variable	4	0.5956	406	1.00	5.00	3.2999	.7767
Work Support composite variable	8	0.7278	390	1.25	5.00	3.9170	.6034
Instructor/Tutor Support composite variable	2	0.8399	449	1.00	5.00	3.6893	.9790
DE Program Administration Support composite variable	11	0.934	47	1.00	4.64	3.0019	.8387

ly (9 items, $\alpha=0.81$), friends (4 items, $\alpha=0.59$), work (8 items, $\alpha=0.72$), instructor/tutors (2 items, $\alpha=0.83$) and distance education program administration (11 items, $\alpha=0.93$) were also identified from items in the survey.

These subscales were correlated with others in the instrument. Global, family, friends, work, and instructor/tutor support scales were positively correlated with Satisfaction with Distance Education (1 item) at the $p<.001$ level for the full sample. There was a negative correlation ($N=106$, $r=-0.202$, $p<.038$) between the Global Support Received Scale and the Anxiety Stress Questionnaire, a modification of the House and Rizzo (1972) scale that was also part of the survey (16 items, $\alpha=0.89$). Family ($r=-.397$), friends ($r=-.383$), work ($r=-.145$), and instructor/tutor ($r=-.255$) scales showed negative correlations and greater levels of significance with the Anxiety/Stress scale ($p<.005$ to $<.001$). Support received from Distance Education Administrators showed a significant correlation with Satisfaction with Distance Education ($N=47$, $r=0.324$, $p<.027$). No significant difference compared with the Anxiety/Stress questionnaire was found ($N=41$, $r=-.198$, $p<.214$).

Discussion

It is evident from these findings that support from various sources is important for women with multiple roles who undertake distance education in professional programs. Although most women who responded to our interviews and survey had supportive spouses, children, employers, and friends, they expressed frustrations and concerns about their workload and the effect their studies were having on relationships and home life. It is important to recognize that the respondents were women who were organized enough to have a spare hour to devote to answering research questions. From them we can learn how to support those who are having even more difficulty. It is worrisome to think of the number of women who must be struggling even harder than our participants to achieve balance in their work, personal, and academic lives. Pressures from professional organizations and employers to achieve and maintain professional competence provided these women as professionals with particular motivation other women may lack when facing the difficulties of adding the student role.

Improving Academic Supports

Instructor/tutors play a large part in the learning experience. Some students identified difficulties in understanding the roles of various faculty assigned to a course: for example, a professor might be responsible for course design and administration, a tutor for answering questions, and a marker for assigning grades. The student might not know with whom to

communicate when she received a low mark or did not understand a concept. Required are clear explanations of roles in each course, directions for when and how to contact teachers, and a clear policy communicated to students and staff about turn-around time for questions. Kowalski (2004) and Lawton (1997) also identified institutional supports such as these as important. These supports, as well as timely, respectful, and meaningful interactions, would help students feel more supported and more in control of their learning environment.

Although administrative services were not rated highly, they too were a source of frustration. Many students had obviously not accessed some services like counseling or program planning. Whether this was due to unavailability of the service, ignorance of its existence, or lack of perceived need was not clear. Ensuring policies and procedures for orienting students, keeping them up to date on changes in programs, and helping them feel connected to their programs would alleviate this source of frustration. User-friendly Web sites and real people to help resolve problems and provide advice could be important factors in easing students' frustration and enhancing progress.

Distance educators have a responsibility to do all they can to make the process of navigating through a program and promoting learning as straightforward as possible. However, as one respondent noted,

To attribute lack of time to DE would be unfair. It is the multiple roles that are undertaken that are time consuming and have a negative impact on time spent for oneself, time with family and friends, household responsibilities and employment obligations that becomes the frustration. We (women) should follow our own advice and "let things go" a bit more, but this is a lifestyle change I have not been able to accomplish. This is not the fault of this or any other DE program.

Family Supports

Educators have little control over the dynamics of students' families. However, they can be proactive and suggest to students beginning their first courses and to those struggling with time management and organization that having a distance student in the family is likely to influence the family unit. Students can be warned that they should attempt to renegotiate expectations for household responsibilities so that all family members understand things cannot be the same. For some women, the desire to do it all may lead to exhaustion, frustration, and stress. Thus faculty and programs have a responsibility to help students identify how to maintain balance in their lives as students, to integrate important family functions and rituals in their busy lives while learning how to handle, or get rid of, some traditional and perhaps inessential activities. Educators may be able to support some women by encouraging them to give them-

selves permission *not* to try to do it all. Awareness of these issues can lead to a proactive approach by students to prevent or ease family tensions.

Peer Student Supports

The data suggested ambivalence about contacting and seeking support from fellow students. Although students made a number of qualitative comments about wanting to know who was in a course and how to contact them, support from other students was not rated highly for importance or for support received. It was clear from the survey that students confirmed Lawton's (1997) finding that they were looking for academic support, not friendship, from their peers. Suggestions that might help meet this need for peer contact include providing class lists with students' locations. This strategy could facilitate formation of study groups and other face-to-face activities for those who want them. E-mail lists of students can also provide students with a non-intrusive way of taking the initiative to contact each other. As well, in those programs with a built-in e-mail system, active use for student interaction can be encouraged.

Limitations

Although the response rate to the questionnaire was high, we could not determine the total number of women enrolled in Canadian professional programs offered by distance education methods at that time. We heard only from those with the time and interest to respond. We do not report in this article on the differences among the distance methods used in the programs. Because the questionnaire was completed electronically, there is a remote possibility that men may have completed it despite the screening questions.

Conclusion

These women's lives changed as a result of being students. As well, the lives of those around them shifted to accommodate their additional role of student. Support of spouse, family, friends, and employers was necessary for success, but studies seldom took a back seat to personal roles and responsibilities. Women experienced physical and emotional pushes and pulls when balancing demands on their time and energy; taking courses by distance was often invisible to others and difficult to explain. However, the ability to learn and the opportunity to achieve professional goals as a direct outcome of being able to take distance education courses helped these women overcome or at least manage the challenges. As one woman pointed out, "This is what you do." The descriptions of life as a woman with multiple roles in professional distance education often reflected stress, guilt, and diminished relationships. However, respondents' satis-

faction was high because accessibility allowed increased self-esteem and professional recognition to be achieved through distance education.

These women with multiple roles offered us much guidance about how their lives as distance education students could be enhanced. Overarching messages were the desire for greater contact with and access to the course instructor, the need for more contact between and among students, the need for ongoing support with and an orientation to technology, and well functioning equipment. It was important that information about program and course requirements be readily available and clear. As well, information about program and course changes was needed.

Professional women are under considerable pressure to maintain competence and upgrade their skills. Women in North American society still feel pressure to be the primary caregiver to children and ill relatives, as well as taking the major responsibility for household tasks. The women in this study were the successful ones who managed to juggle multiple responsibilities and were motivated enough to make the lifestyle changes that were necessary when adding the role of student to many other roles. We heard from these women that they may not be able to do it all, and that this causes frustration and guilt. However, they have managed to accomplish a great deal educationally, professionally, and personally and are proud of themselves for these accomplishments. Distance educators must consider their particular needs when planning programs with large numbers of women. Doing so will promote success and make programs more accessible for all distance students.

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