ISSUES AND PERSPECTIVES FOR WOMEN IN DISTANCE EDUCATION:
A GUIDEBOOK
BY
ROSE ANN SWANSON

A Final Project submitted to the
Campus Alberta Applied Psychology: Counselling Initiative
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTERS OF COUNSELLING

Alberta
January 2006
The undersigned certifies that she or he has read and recommends to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a final project entitled ISSUES AND PERSPECTIVES FOR WOMEN IN DISTANCE EDUCATION: A GUIDEBOOK submitted by ROSE ANN SWANSON in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Counselling.
CAMPUS ALBERTA APPLIED PSYCHOLOGY: COUNSELLING INITIATIVE

SECOND READER SIGNATURE PAGE

Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

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Susan D. Molsey, Ph.D.
Second Reader

January 20, 2006
Date
ABSTRACT

Women are the primary users of Distance Education (DE) in many countries throughout the world and are confronted with numerous challenges when working towards completing higher education through DE. This final project includes an in-depth examination of DE literature which reveals general facts about DE as well as specific issues and perspectives of women in DE. A guidebook was developed from these issues and provides a summarization of the literature review, an understanding of the barriers and stressors women face in DE, and strategies to overcome these barriers and stressors. With an emphasis on female DE students’ successes and celebrations, the intent of this guidebook is to provide female DE learners with encouragement and hope for success towards their academic endeavors. Future endeavors in the area of women and DE are outlined within this project and aim to enhance women’s success in DE overall.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Distance Education (DE) has been in existence for over 100 years and is becoming increasingly popular throughout the world. Many individuals who, for one reason or another, cannot attend traditional classroom-based instruction may find the flexibility and accessibility of DE a valuable means of obtaining academic credentials, knowledge for personal growth, and development. Chung (1990) advocated that:

Distance education provides opportunities for adults to change careers later in life; to enhance their skills and qualifications while retaining their jobs; to bring up a young family while continuing with their education; to keep up with ever-changing technologies; and to improve their social position and status. (p. 61)

In many developing countries illiteracy rates are exceptionally high, especially among women. "Common patterns in role and status of women emerge across countries, despite widely different circumstances. They reflect the cultural and cross-cultural social norms and traditions by which the subservient status of women is maintained" (Evans, 1995, p. 3). Evans also reported that, in countries such as India and Africa and in Pacific cultures, social, cultural, and economic conditions work together to encourage early termination of education of girls.

For many individuals in these developing countries, DE is seen as a means of survival. Harsh, rugged environments and geographically isolated communities make attendance at learning centres impossible. In countries where the role and status of women have been debased or devalued for centuries, higher education for women is discouraged. More recently, women have used DE as a way to counteract the cultural sanctions and oppression they experience and to work towards enhancing their lives and the lives of
their families. Through DE, women in countries such as India, Iran, Mongolia, and Australia are learning about personal development as well as family health and wellness. Specific examples include women learning about birth control, stages of child development, and the need for vaccinations, eliminating the spread of diseases such as HIV/AIDS and influenza, proper food handling and preparation, productive agricultural and economical practices, and basic literacy skills (Mehran, 1999; Russell, 1994). DE also opens the door to opportunities for basic human rights and increases the possibilities for equal opportunities and social justice for all women.

In North America, DE is also becoming more prevalent as an established mode of learning. Statistics reveal that the majority of DE students are women. DE students tend to be 1) older than the typical undergraduate, 2) female, 3) employed full-time, and 4) married (Thompson, 1998). Bontempi (2004) reported that the majority of DE students are between 25 and 34 years old and that over 70% of recent graduates who studied by distance worked full-time during their degree program. It is significant to mention that the childbearing years are also typically between the ages of 25 and 34.

Srivastava (2002) maintained that enrollment as well as the number of female graduates enrolling in higher education is increasing. At Athabasca University (AU), Canada's Open University situated in Athabasca, Alberta, "the proportion of women graduates grew steadily in the past five years from 38 percent in 1998-99 to 54 percent in 2002-03" (Athabasca University, 2003, p. 12). AU currently has 29,542 students (26,933 undergraduate and 2609 graduate) enrolled in DE courses (Athabasca University, 2004a). In 2004 Athabasca University awarded 353 graduate degrees and 375 graduate diplomas (Athabasca University, 2004b). The Campus Alberta Applied Psychology (CAAP): Counselling Initiative, introduced in January, 2002, is a partnership between Athabasca
University, University of Calgary, and the University of Lethbridge. This program currently has approximately 220 graduate students and the majority of these students are female (83%) and 28 to 60 years old (Collins & Jerry, 2005).

Women in DE often manage multiple life roles; therefore, they are attracted to the flexibility and accessibility of DE and its potential for attainment alongside childrearing. For women who have committed to raising their children at home, pursuing their education by DE is seen as ideal. As such, major considerations in examining DE for women are childbearing and childrearing and how women incorporate family responsibilities into their already existing professional goal-oriented activities. Pregnancy and motherhood affect all aspects of a woman's life, including the biological, psychological, and social; finding a way to balance these factors along with educational goals is vital to female learners’ success.

In September of 2001 a report released by the American Association of University Women (Carlson, 2001) indicated that women who take DE courses face substantially more challenges than men. For women who have made the conscious decision to pursue tertiary education alongside childbearing and childrearing, the everyday reality can be "chaos and constant interruptions, where the mother is at the beck and call of her children (and sometimes her husband) and their immediate needs which tend to take precedence over the women's desire for uninterrupted and concentrated study time" (von Prummer, 2000, p. 46). The female DE student often feels guilty and unsure as to whether she has made the right decision in pursuing academic studies.

In addition, women face many other barriers and challenges when pursuing post-secondary/higher education through DE and the effects of these barriers can be undue stress and attrition. Cross (1981) identified three categories of barriers that adult learners
face when considering participation in higher education. They are: situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers. Situational barriers include lack of support from family, friends, and employers. Dispositional barriers include lack of self-confidence, fear of failure, and anxiety related to computer usage. Institutional barriers include lack of technical assistance, support services (counselling), and access to library and administration needs. Cross maintained that the five most prevalent barriers are (a) lack of money, (b) lack of time, (c) lack of study skills, (d) students thinking they are too old, and (e) distance from the educational institution. Sociocultural barriers were not specifically addressed by Cross, but are quite relevant to the life of the female DE student. These barriers include unrealistic societal and cultural views and expectations of women (Orr & Wong-Wylie, in review).

Further situational barriers were identified by Furst-Bowe and Dittmann (2001). Their research concluded that balancing the responsibilities of family, employment, community, and education can be challenging. Difficulties accessing childcare, insufficient time, and energy for studies due to employment or family responsibilities, change of job or residence, change in family responsibilities, lack of financial support, illness of self or family member, and pregnancy are all situational factors that can hinder academic success. Burke’s (2001) research concurred with Cross’s in that lack of social support and guidance, poor study conditions at home including lack of communication between the student and family members are anxiety-promoting challenges that women in DE can experience. Galusha (1997) maintained that a "student's lack of adequate hardware and the subsequent cost barrier of obtaining equipment could place undue hardship on some remote students" (p. 9).
Dispositional barriers, which can occur for DE students as a result of geographical isolation and lack of social interaction with other students, include feelings of alienation and the resulting perception that they do not belong to a scholarly community (Galusha, 1997). Burke (2001) also described "expectations and attitudes, arising from their position in society" (p. 610) as an obstacle to a woman's success in her studies. Further dispositional barriers encountered by DE students are lack of experience and training in reference to technical issues (e.g., e-mailing, word processing) and DE (Galusha, 1997). This inexperience can promote feelings of insecurity and helplessness. Student inability to manage the volume or level of work has also been highlighted throughout DE literature as a challenge to learning.

Furst-Bowe and Dittman’s (2001) findings coincided with Cross’s (1981) research in the area of institutional barriers. They acknowledged lack of support and services as significant barriers for DE students. Institutional barriers can be the source of many difficulties, such as chronic stress, decreased motivation, and inability to cope with heavy course loads.

Despite situational, dispositional, institutional, sociocultural, and other barriers to DE, DE is one of the most convenient ways to simultaneously accomplish personal and professional goals. Given rampant changes in the workforce, and the fact that "technological advancements and the explosion of knowledge are making it more difficult to remain current and maintain professional competence" (Andrusyszyn, Cragg & Fraser, 2004, p. 4) it becomes that much more critical to acknowledge and make provisions for situational, dispositional, institutional, sociocultural, and other barriers. Overcoming barriers enhances the learning experience and quality of life of female DE students.
Project Description

The intent of this CAAP Final Project is an inquiry into DE and issues and perspectives of women and DE through a comprehensive literature review. This author explored the scholarly literature on the definition and history of DE, trends, users of DE, why women choose DE, and the issues women face in DE. Many barriers and challenges were revealed through the “issues” section of the literature review. The author then examined the effects of these barriers on female DE students and what strategies female DE students have used in the past to support their success in DE studies. These influencing factors formed the basis for the development of a guidebook for women embarking on graduate education through DE. Relevant aspects of the female DE student's experience, such as concerns, needs, successes, and celebrations are included in the guidebook. The guidebook is intended to normalize some of the anxieties and frustrations that female DE students experience as a result of their new role as a graduate DE student and provides coping strategies that the author and other female DE students have utilized.

The objectives of the guidebook are:

1. To provide general knowledge in the area of DE (e.g., Brief Overview of the History of DE, What is DE? Trends in DE, Who are the Users of DE? Why Do Women Choose DE? Issues Women Experience in DE).
2. To identify barriers and challenges that women face when pursuing graduate education through DE.
3. To provide strategies for women to manage childbearing and childrearing with DE educational goals.
4. To examine and report women's perceptions of DE and learn from their unique experiences.
5. To enhance the learning experience and quality of life of graduate female DE students by providing support through the use of a practical, relevant, and helpful resource.

6. To provide encouragement, hope, and promote a firm belief that with motivation and perseverance, accomplishing career and educational goals is not only a distinct possibility, but a probability.

Summary

The fact that most DE learners are women and face a multitude of barriers and challenges (including multiple life roles) speaks to the importance of developing a useful resource that will provide a sense of empowerment and lead to the successful completion of studies. Success leads to the enhancement of self-confidence, and can provide women with new perspectives, new opportunities, and a feeling of more meaning in life. This resource also promotes greater understanding and acceptance of diversity, increased tolerance and resilience, and enhanced personhood.

Although these theories have been important in describing and understanding distance learning and the distance learner, they are not all-inclusive and do not provide an overall sense of what the DE student experiences. Picciano (2001) asserted that "new technologies such as asynchronous 'virtual systems' have significantly changed the concept of distance learning and have made many of these theories less applicable" (p. 66). McIsaac and Gunawardena (1996) concurred with Picciano and indicated that:

There have been a variety of efforts to identify theoretical foundations for the study of distance education. Thus far, there has been little agreement about which theoretical principles are common to the field and even less agreement on how to proceed in conducting programmatic research. (p. 3)

Few existing models provide a thorough, meaningful, and relevant understanding of the female student's overall experience in DE from the decision to enrol and participate to the eventual completion of studies and there are so many factors that influence this process. I have identified two models as most useful in providing an understanding of this
process for women. They are Cross's (1981) Chain of Response (COR) Model and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Bioecological Model. I described these two models with reference to women for ease of description; however neither models were developed specifically for women.

Cross's Chain of Response Model

Cross's (1981) Chain of Response (COR) model is very important to understanding a woman's decision to participate in adult learning activities. This interactionist model assumes that a woman's participation in learning activities results from a chain of responses. Each response is determined based on a self-evaluation of where she is at in her environment.

Cross (1981) indicated that the chain of response, points A to G, begins once the woman has evaluated her potential for participation in higher learning (Point A). Some women may not believe they are capable of achieving in competitive education and are therefore less motivated to participate, while others are sure of their ability and plough ahead through their studies. Point B involves the woman's past experiences and subsequent attitudes towards education. If her own past educational experiences are positive she is more motivated and likely to participate. Her views are also influenced by the experiences of others in education.

Cross's (1981) model links points A and B together, suggesting "that there is a relatively stable and characteristic stance toward learning that makes some people eager to seek out new experiences with a potential for growth while others avoid challenges to their accustomed ways of thinking or behaving" (p. 126). Women who have had positive educational experiences establish a more positive self-evaluation, which in turn promotes more positive educational experiences.
Point C in the COR model involves the importance of future goals to the woman and the expectation that participation in education will meet these goals. If the goals are important to her and she believes she is likely to achieve her goals once she has participated in education, then her motivation to participate will be stronger and her possibilities for success more assured. Cross (1981) indicated that expectancy and self-esteem play a major role in being a successful student. If a woman has high self-esteem then she expects that she will be successful. On the other hand, if she has low self-esteem she will be more doubtful of her ability to succeed in adult learning.

Further, life transitions, Point D, are the changes and developments in a woman's life that demand adjustment. Cross (1981) articulated that these changes can be gradual or sudden and will often propel individuals forward. She described that a divorce or the loss of a job may "trigger a latent desire for education into action" (p. 127).

Point E includes opportunities and barriers. Once the woman has decided to pursue adult education and is motivated to participate, opportunities and barriers will ultimately influence her continued interest. "If adults get to this point in the COR model with a strong desire to participate, it is likely that the force of their motivation will encourage them to seek out special opportunities and to overcome modest barriers" (Cross, 1981, p. 127). Overcoming barriers would likely promote increased resilience to further barriers/stressors. Those who are not particularly motivated will be disinclined to participate when confronted with even the slightest barriers.

Information, namely accurate information (Point F), is essential to adult learners. Cross (1981) asserted the role of information in the model is "critical in that it provides the information that links motivated learners to appropriate opportunities" (p. 127). Without the necessary and applicable information, the adult woman learner may lose out on
learning opportunities and fold in the face of barriers. Cross purported that there are forces for and against participation and that "most efforts to attract adults to learning activities start at Point E" (p. 129) of the model. Point G is the decision to participate in adult learning.

*Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model*

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Bioecological model is a multidimensional model consisting of four interrelated levels of environment that influence a woman's overall development. This model acknowledges that women do not develop in isolation but in relation to their families, school, communities and societies. This model views the female DE student “in context”.

For instance, the *microsystem* involves interactions between the developing female DE student and her immediate external environment. These interactions are considered *proximal processes* and, among other things, influence personality and cognition in the individual. "A person brings to proximal processes a set of dispositions, resources (pre-existing abilities, experiences, knowledge, and skills) and demand characteristics. These, in turn, are influenced by biological and physical levels of functioning that include the genes" (Broderick & Blewitt, 2003, p. 17). Proximal processes are thus influenced by distal processes, which are found within the woman (physiological make-up) or outside the immediate environment of the woman (economic influences).

At the microsystem level, relationships are bidirectional: away from the female DE student and towards the female DE student. The immediate environment includes family, peers and friends, academic advisors, instructors, mentors, courses, DE technologies, practicum and related field experience, administrative structures, workplace, and community. These immediate influences have the greatest direct impact on the female DE
student. "Relations among these microsystems – referred to as the mesosystem – modify each of them" (Broderick & Blewitt, 2003, p. 16). For example, a female DE student's interactions with family can affect her interactions with peers or instructors.

The exosystem includes the larger social system (settings, situations, and events) in which a female DE student might not interact directly, but that inevitably influence her development. Examples of these influences are the university or institutional structure, human resources (student support and advising services, library services), non-human resources (digital reading room, database access), administration, ever-evolving research and development, the various DE degree programs, councils such as the Graduate Student's Association council, committees, and the mission of the institution (University of Memphis, 2005).

The outermost layer of Bronfenbrenner's model is the macrosystem, which consists of cultural ideologies, values, and laws as they pertain to social, legal, educational, economic, and political systems. Essentially, this larger system assists in shaping Microsystems. Examples of macrosystems are provincial agencies, professional associations, local educational agencies, accreditation agencies, community influences, cultural influences, legal mandates, professional ethics, economic influences and public opinion (University of Memphis, 2005).

Essentially Cross’s (1981) and Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) models interweave to inform the development of this final project literature review and guidebook. Cross’s model considers the process of the potential female DE student’s decision to participate in adult learning and Bronfenbrenner’s model considers the various levels of environment this process occurs in. Together they provide an overall view of the female DE student from her decision to participate, to the factors in her environment that will challenge or
enable her, to eventual completion of her studies. To describe how these models work together the author provides the following interpretation.

First, Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) model describes how the woman’s personality, beliefs, and attitudes are a product of her overall development and how these dispositions and past experiences affect her immediate, external environment. He also indicated that her environment affects her disposition. As mentioned previously, the woman is seen “in context” which is significant to the development of this entire final project.

Cross’s (1981) model steps in to describe the process of the potential female DE student’s consideration of participation in adult education including evaluation of self and environment to eventual participation. Personality, beliefs, attitudes, experience and how things are going in her immediate environment (microsystem) are major factors in the woman’s determining of her readiness and motivation towards participation in adult learning.

Cross (1981) purported that the woman takes into consideration the importance of goals and expectations that participation in adult education will meet these goals. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) model suggests that the female DE student’s immediate environmental influences (family, social network, educational institution, technologies) will affect the ultimate achievement of these goals.

As well, Cross (1981) and Bronfenbrenner (1979) consider life transitions that might include pregnancy, childbearing, and childrearing, which affect biopsychosocial development and demand adult learner adjustment to environment and vice versa. Addressing life transitions and the effects of these transitions on female DE students is crucial to her success.
According to both Cross (1981) and Bronfenbrenner (1979), relationships in the woman’s environment are bidirectional and Bronfenbrenner’s model specifically reported that immediate influences, including family, friends, and employment, have the greatest impact on the student. Therefore it is essential to take these influences into consideration in the development of the literature review and guidebook.

In addition, Cross’s (1981) model looks at opportunities, barriers, and information that will affect potential female DE student’s decision to participate in adult learning. These opportunities, situational, dispositional, institutional, and sociocultural barriers, and the need for accurate information present themselves in the adult learner’s various levels of environment (microsystem to macrosystem) and depending on how these challenges are perceived will determine motivation to proceed with further learning. Opportunities, barriers, and information factors that are detrimental to the decision to participate in adult learning through DE will be examined at great length in this project. Sociocultural barriers, which were not specifically acknowledged in Cross’s barriers to adult participation model are a major influence on the adult learner and would present themselves throughout Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) levels.

Summary

Indeed, Cross’s (1981) and Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) models are distinct but work well together in examining the adult learner’s experience in deciding to participate in adult learning, how she affects and is affected by her environment, and the barriers and challenges that must be overcome in order to be successful in her studies. It is obvious that women are influenced in many different ways through interactions within their environment. Interactions with family, home, school, community, and society are key to her development. These influences will affect her cognitions, behaviors, and overall health

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and well-being. An understanding of this overall process enables better identification of appropriate and relevant supports and resources that will aid in the empowerment and success of the female DE student.
CHAPTER III

Procedures

There are two main phases involved in this Campus Alberta Applied Psychology (CAAP) Final Project. The first phase is a comprehensive literature review conducted in the area of DE and issues and perspectives for women in DE. The second phase is the development of a guidebook for graduate female DE students, derived from this literature review. The intent of the guidebook is to provide women who are considering enrolling in DE, or who have made the decision to pursue further education through DE, with knowledge, strategies, and tools for combating the challenges and stressors they will face as graduate students. A copy of the guidebook is provided in the Appendix.

In the initial phase of this project, the author identified relevant topics in the area of DE and issues and perspectives of women in DE. The author’s interest in these topics stemmed from previous research she completed in the area of stress and the female post-secondary student. The author felt that expanding on this previous research to include general knowledge of DE and how to cope with the stress/ors of being a female DE student would benefit women considering or actively pursuing higher education through DE. These topics convalesced to provide an overview of DE and issues for women in DE. The literature review includes: the definition and history of DE; trends in DE; the users of DE; why women learners choose DE over traditional education; the issues women experience in DE and how these issues affect them on a biological, psychological, and social level; stress and strategies for alleviating stress in students; case studies of successful DE students, and strategies utilized by female DE students in order to become successful in their graduate studies.
The author conducted an inquiry into these topics through a comprehensive literature review in order to further her own and others’ understanding of DE in general. Through discussion with the project supervisor the author decided that a practical, relevant, and useful guidebook could be developed from the inquiry for potential female students considering, or already enrolled in, graduate studies through DE.

Next, several literature reviews from various sources including the Internet and the Infrastructure Network were helpful in providing an overview of DE and potential barriers and trends in DE. Most helpful were Rekkedal's (1994) *Research in Distance Education – Past, Present and Future*, Galusha's (1997) *Barriers to Learning in Distance Education*, Zirkle's (2004) *Access Barriers Experienced by Adults in Distance Education Courses and Programs: A Review of the Research Literature*, and Howell, Williams, and Lindsay's (2005) *Thirty-Two Trends Affecting Distance Education: An Informed Foundation for Strategic Planning*. One particularly beneficial secondary source was Schlosser and Anderson's (1994) text entitled *Distance Education: Review of the Literature*. The reference sections in each of these literature reviews were perused for further relevant sources.

Several preliminary sources and relevant journals were also identified. Academic Search Premier, PsychINFO, EBSCO host, EMBASE, Excerpta Medica, PsychArticles, and Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection were the most valuable databases located. The World Wide Web (WWW) search engine Google was most advantageous to this project and yielded many articles. Integral journals in the development of this final project included the *American Journal of Distance Education*, the *Distance Education Report*, *New Horizons in Adult Education*, and *Chronicle of Higher Learning*. Cooper’s
(1989) ‘ancestry’ approach was utilized with articles from these journals to find additional primary research articles and journals.

During the process of searching the databases and the Internet many keywords and phrases were used, such as the *history of Distance Education*, *what is Distance Education?*, *trends in Distance Education*, *issues for women in Distance Education*, *stressors in Distance Education*, *barriers in Distance Education*, *issues in Distance Education*, *who are the users of Distance Education?*, *gender and Distance Education*, *why do women learners choose Distance Education over traditional education?*, *Distance Education vs. traditional education*, *issues women face in Distance Education*, *stress and the Distance Education student*, *what is stress?*, *strategies for alleviating stress*, *stress busters*, *students coping with stress*, *strategies used to succeed in Distance Education*, *successes of women in Distance Education*, *celebrations of women in Distance Education*, and *perspectives of women in Distance Education*.

As the search progressed it became evident that many other terms are used in the literature to describe DE. Some of these are: e-learning, distance learning, web-based learning, Internet-based learning, virtual education, online learning, open learning, and external studies. Articles utilizing any of the various terminologies that were found to be relevant for the final project were printed or saved electronically. The author was able to find a vast amount of resources using the term DE thus alternate terms were not used in searches. Through these searches an overview of the topics was established and a foundation of relevant and rich resources obtained.

Athabasca University's library resources staff was helpful in identifying and sending the author pertinent articles and texts for this final project. The author also visited the library on two occasions to search through its substantial supply of DE material. Two of
the most influential and relevant texts found were von Prummer's (2000) *Women and Distance Education: Challenges and Opportunities* and Kramarae's (2001) *The Third Shift*. All of the sources were read, analyzed, and evaluated for relevancy to the final project. Because of the vast amount of literature in the area of DE this process took eight months.

The author consolidated the literature in an organized and meaningful fashion in order to inform the writing of the literature review. The literature review, including the following topics, was written and presented in this order.

1. Brief overview of the history of DE (e.g., evolution of e-learning)
2. What is DE?
3. Trends in DE (e.g., student/enrolment, technology, academic, faculty, economic)
4. Who are the users of DE? (e.g., characteristics, demographics, statistics)
5. Why do women learners choose DE?
6. Issues women experience in DE (e.g., gender gap, androcentrism, childbearing and parenting)

The author changed Topic #5 from *Why do women learners choose DE over traditional education?* (as in the Letter of Intent) to *Why do women learners choose DE?* because there are many differing opinions about the quality and effectiveness of DE versus traditional classroom-based education. Describing the pros and cons in each area is beyond the scope of this paper and would take the focus away from why women choose DE. For further information in the area of DE vs. Traditional classroom-based education see http://www.nosignificantdifference.org/.

Topic 1, brief overview of the history of DE, included information accumulated from searches of literature published from January 1975 to the present, 2005. Information
highlighting trends in DE, current issues affecting women in DE, potential barriers, and facililitative factors (successes and celebrations) in the experience was drawn primarily from the last 15 years. The literature review provided the groundwork for the guidebook.

Topics 1 to 6 of the aforementioned literature review were summarized briefly, in a user-friendly way, for use in the guidebook (section 3 - 8). The guidebook is organized as follows.

1. Introduction
2. Author's Personal Journey
3. Brief Overview of the History of DE
4. What is DE?
5. Trends in DE
6. Who are the Users of DE?
7. Why do Women Choose DE?
8. Issues Women Experience in DE
9. How to Make DE Work for You
10. What is Stress?
11. Strategies for Alleviating Stress
12. Successes and Celebrations

The Introduction section of the guidebook describes Cross's (1981) Chain of Response model and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Bioecological model in terms of how they inform the guidebook. Sociocultural barriers (which are absent from Cross's model) were also described in this section.

The How to Make DE Work for You section is more extensive and constitutes the practical component of the guidebook. This section includes strategies that female DE
students can use for managing the impact of various barriers in DE, including dispositional, situational, institutional, and sociocultural barriers. Given that stress is a predominant experience of female DE students, as described in the literature, a section on What is Stress? thoroughly defines stress and stressors, the stress response and its physiological opposite, the relaxation response. The Strategies for Alleviating Stress section presents therapeutic means of reducing stress, such as progressive muscle relaxation, mindfulness meditation, and journalling. For this section the author was able to utilize resources gathered and information gleaned from the Campus Alberta Applied Psychology- CAAP 615 Intervening to Facilitate Client Change and CAAP 635 Health Psychology courses.

As the tenor of this guidebook is on success, the Successes and Celebrations section provides stories (and quotes) of hope and inspiration for the DE student as she commences her DE journey. The uplifting stories of four courageous, resilient, and determined female DE students are included at the end of the guidebook.
Brief Overview of the History of Distance Education

DE has been in existence for at least 100 years. "The first formal distance learning programs appeared in the mid-nineteenth century as postal systems were developed and as more people learned to read and write" (Picciano, 2001, p. 8). The evolution of the penny post allowed for two-way communication through the exchange of letters (at the cost of one penny) between teachers and students. In Canada, the Canadian North West Mounted Police were used to deliver courses in areas without mail service (Srivastava, 2002). Faith (1988) described her grandparents as Canadian pioneers and prairie homesteaders who…relied greatly on home study for the education of their twelve children, and it was my grandmother who supervised this activity. Indeed, there was pressure on girls from pioneer families to be highly literate so that they could one day, in turn, educate their own children. (p. 5)

Initially, correspondence study was developed in order to provide equal access to educational opportunities to those who could not afford full-time residence at an educational institution. The elite rejected DE and thought it to be inferior education (McIsaac & Gunawardena, 1996). Indeed, there is still a tendency today to think that any method other than traditional classroom-based learning is inferior (Srivastava, 2002).

While some early correspondence education systems were run by government, professional, and trade associations, others were operated by colleges on a not-for-profit basis and commercial companies wanting to make money. The types of courses offered included shorthand, various languages, mining, and the prevention of mining accidents (Schlosser & Anderson, 1994).
One of the largest and most successful correspondence schools was Hermod's, which was founded in Sweden in 1898 by H. S. Hermod (Picciano, 2001). In 1883, the Chautauqua College of Liberal Arts in New York State offered one of the first American academic degree programs available by correspondence. With the gain in popularity of DE schools/programs/courses, technology began to evolve at a fairly rapid pace all over the world.

In the 1920s, there were major advances in United States communications technology, with 176 radio stations established at educational settings in order to provide DE (Picciano, 2001; Schlosser & Anderson, 1994). By the 1930s radio stations were replaced by television and video technologies and consequently hundreds of correspondence programs were made available all over the world (Picciano, 2001).

Further, from the 1950s to 1970s educational television programs were developed by major universities and then broadcast on the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). To this day PBS continues to be a major player, on a national level, in the area of DE offering educational television programs such as the Adult Learning Satellite Service, Ready to Earn, and Going the Distance (Picciano, 2001).

In 1971, the Open University of the United Kingdom (OU UK) was founded. It was the first large-scale DE institution in Western Europe. This world-renowned and influential university is currently Britain's largest single teaching institution and at any given time has over 200,000 students, with half registered in degree programs and half enrolled in single courses (Lunneborg, 1994). According to Holmberg (1986) the OU UK increased the popularity and status of distance education, and thus encouraged the development of similar educational institutions in industrial nations, such as West
Germany, Japan, Canada, and lesser-developed nations such as Sri Lanka and Pakistan. Athabasca University (AU), Canada's Open University, situated in Athabasca, Alberta, adopted Britain's OU model in the 1970s (Runte, 1981).

Newer television delivery technologies such as cable (CATV), satellite communications, and fiber optics also became available in the 1970s to 1980s (Picciano, 2001). Created in 1980, Learn/Alaska became the first state educational satellite system operating in the United States and was able to offer several hours of educational television services daily to more than a hundred of its remote villages. Similar systems have been utilized in other states (Picciano, 2001; Schlosser & Anderson, 1994). In describing fiber optics in the delivery of DE, Picciano (2001) maintained that:

The Iowa Communications Network (ICN) has established one of the most extensive fiber optic educational networks in the country. The plan is for all school districts, colleges, and public libraries in Iowa to be connected to the ICN. The ICN model is being considered or duplicated in other states because it provides full-motion video, two-way interactive communications, as well as digital (Internet) and voice services. (p. 10)

Thereafter, digital technology via the Internet and other computer networks were developed and utilized by DE programs in the 1990s. Digital technology was broadly defined by Picciano (2001) as "any technology that uses electronic 'on-off' impulses to store, transmit, and receive data" (p. 193). Examples of communications and audio/video equipment that use digital technology are audio compact discs, digital video, digital communications switches, and digital television.

The World Wide Web (WWW), text-based e-mail and group software, and asynchronous learning networks (ALN) have provided a fairly inexpensive technology for
the delivery of DE (Picciano, 2001). Lau (2000) described the conceptualization of the WWW at the European Particle Physics Laboratory (CERN) in Geneva, Switzerland to its introduction in 1991. It was initially developed in order to provide individuals in the academic and scientific community with access to the most updated research and scientific materials. Its emergence has become inexplicably valuable to the world of DE and "It is the fastest, easiest and richest means of information and knowledge dissemination not only as information provider, but also as network connector around the world regardless of time and space" (Kamel, 2000, p. 167).

Currently, DE is available throughout the world, in both industrialized and developing countries. According to McIsaac and Gunawardena (1996), since the 1950s, the developing world's population has doubled to 5 billion people. As the population increases so does the growth of DE.

Kramarae (2001) identified many other factors that have influenced the growth of DE, including:

- decrease in government subsidization of the public institutions of higher education,
- increase in costs of higher education at both public and private institutions,
- increase in the number of employed women,
- reduction in secure long-term jobs,
- increase in credential requirements for entry to and continuing work in many jobs,
- rapid change in information technologies,
- increase in online business,
- increase in venture capital funding in knowledge enterprises,
• increase in college enrolments,
• increase in attention to lifelong education,
• increase in competition among institutions for education dollars,
• increase in the globalization of competitiveness and commerce,
• shift to the use of web-based training for workers, and
• shifts by the United States Army to distance learning via laptop computers. (p. 4)

These changes have significant implications for the future of DE and are strong indicators that DE will continue to evolve in order to meet the needs of a competitive global economy.

What is Distance Education?

DE is a viable alternative to traditional classroom-based learning. It is convenient and flexible and allows individuals to register in courses or to enrol in undergraduate and graduate degree courses/programs anytime, from virtually anywhere. Rezabek (1999) asserted that DE can be incorporated into an individual’s various everyday activities at home or at work.

Stevenson (2000) provided specific examples of employment training courses available online including on the job safety courses, human resource topics such as sexual harassment, management of skills such as team-building, the use of specific medical equipment as well as other types of equipment. As well, Stevenson indicated that access to quality education in the form of DE is available to individuals of all ages, all over the world, and in all types of financial circumstances. Educational opportunities abound. With today's emphasis on lifelong learning, DE provides individuals with opportunities for continued personal and professional growth and development.
Moreover, many terms and definitions are used in the current literature to describe DE. For example, the term E-learning is quite common. Others include: distance learning, external studies, remote learning, open learning, distributed learning, non-traditional study, asynchronous learning, telelearning, supported self-study, individualized learning, independent learning, student-centered learning, interactive learning, resource-based learning, computer-based training, computer-mediated distance learning, computer-assisted learning, online education, Web-based learning, and flexible learning. Although there may be slight variations in the terminology, these terms are all used to describe the basic concept of DE, which is defined by Rezabek (1999) as:

The transportation of information and the involvement of a learner in the acquisition of knowledge and understanding of an area of study through planned, usually structured, and organized (but also incidental) communication, that also uses supplemental resources and media-assisted two-way communication, where the learner and instructor are separated by distance and/or time. (p. 12)

Interestingly, the United States Department of Education broadens the definition somewhat by acknowledging that DE supports the pursuit of lifelong learning. They offer that “Distance learning is used in all areas of education including Pre-K through grade 12, higher education, home school education, continuing education, corporate training, military and government training, and telemedicine” (Gilbert, 2001, p. 17).

As well, there are numerous DE providers identified in the literature. The Distance Education and Training Council (DETC) offered a listing of institutions offering DE including: major corporations and small businesses, educational agencies, government agencies, branches of the armed services, trade associations, religious institutions, service
industries, political entities, private entrepreneurs, and charitable, non-profit organizations. (Gilbert, 2001).

Stevenson (2000) was more specific in describing various types of providers. They are “ivy-league bastions like Harvard and Yale; mom-and-pop start up operations; fraudulent diploma mills; several major book publishers; booksellers like fatbrain.com; community and junior colleges; training organizations specializing in job-skills training; technical schools; and professional organizations offering certificates that can lead to licensing” (p. 12).

As Stevenson indicated above there are disreputable providers out there. Despite the legitimacy of many DE programs, "Buyer Beware" remains a valid adage. It is essential to differentiate between legitimate and unscrupulous DE providers. There are many DE school directories, school catalogues, and Internet websites available that can provide relevant and useful information, such as relevant contacts, application and registration fees, financial options, technical assistance, grants and scholarships, sources of credit, tuition, delivery information, rigor of the program, residency requirements, technological requirements, and specialized or professional accreditation information. This type of information will help individuals decide on a legitimate and reputable DE course or program that will suit their needs (Stevenson, 2000; Wilson, 2001).

According to Kramarae (2001), many DE programs are not accredited and have not received a formal stamp of approval resulting from an in-depth and all-encompassing inspection by the appropriate accrediting agencies. This indicates that they have not met the standards expected of traditional courses and programs. Many programs have invented accreditation agencies for their schools and credits received from these programs may be worthless. This is time and money wasted and time and money are valuable commodities
in this day and age. Picciano (2001) stressed that "distance learning providers and regional accreditating agencies will need to continue to be scrupulous in assuring the quality of courses and programs offered. Distance learning providers should publicize well all accreditation and reviews in their recruitment material" (p. 204). For example, AU, Canada’s Open University, is an accredited institution (which can be verified in their publications), and has just recently become accredited in the U.S.

At present, there are three popular forms of distance learning: broadcast television, two-way videoconferencing, and asynchronous learning network (ALN). Broadcast television involves an instructor delivering a lecture via video technology synchronously into one or many students' homes. Although direct communication with the instructor is not possible during the lecture, students can contact the instructor at a later date via telephone, mail or e-mail. Two-way videoconferencing involves an instructor delivering lessons at a college campus; as these lessons are being videotaped they are also being viewed at a local school. Two-way videoconferencing uses video technology and allows for immediate communication between instructors and students. ALN involves the use of computer technology whereby the instructor utilizes the World Wide Web and group e-mail software to deliver lessons. Interaction between instructors and students is asynchronous (Picciano, 2001), which means that it does not need to occur at the same time.

Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) is a popular term found in the DE literature and involves communication between two or more people whereby digital hardware is used as a medium. CMC often employs e-mail, discussion forums, chat rooms, and bulletin board systems. Kramarae (2001) described newer computer-conferencing programs that allow for more dynamic, interactive processes between
learners and teachers. Internet Relay Chat (IRC) allows students and teachers to communicate in real time. She described text-based social and educational programs such as MUDs (Multi-User Domain) and MOOs (MUD, Object-Oriented) that allow participants who are using synchronous communication to create new names and personalities for themselves and to "describe characters, places, objects, and events. MUDS are usually used for role-playing games, while MOOs are usually used for social interaction, including exploration of ideas" (p. 39). Kramarae further described interactive programs whereby individuals can chat with other users through the use of their own visible and manipulatable online character.

In addition, Stevenson (2000) presented other more familiar and readily available technologies for use by DE students including faxing, scanning, teleconferencing, training via CD-ROM, video and audiotapes. These aim to supplement DE learning. Print-based materials in the form of textbooks, journals, and assignments are the oldest and most commonly used technologies in DE.

Next, the roles of instructors and students in DE are quite different from those in traditional classroom-based learning. The DE instructor's role consists of disseminating information, facilitating discussion among students, coaching, and evaluating students throughout their studies, as opposed to face-to-face lecturing. DE instructors are often the ones who decide on the class content and design the materials that will be used in the online courses they teach.

The role of the DE student is a more active approach to learning. Students need to be organized, self-reliant, and motivated as self-directed learners are most likely to excel in DE (Stevenson, 2000). According to Gilbert (2001):
The online environment requires the learner to be actively involved in his or her own learning and provides both a series of choices to make and an immediate response to each action, so participation demands more, engages more, and empowers more than the traditional approaches. (p. 71)

The estimated amount of time needed to complete DE courses will vary depending on the expectations of the program. Stevenson (2000) lists the following types of activities that an online learner may encounter in a typical week. They include: reading the instructor's lecture for the week; locating, downloading, and printing necessary articles or Web sites suggested by the instructor; researching and writing weekly assignments (often in the form of questions) and posting them to an online discussion forum. In addition, returning to the forum in order to view others’ posts and arranging times with other coursemates to meet and discuss coursework via telephone conferencing, e-mail, or the chat room, are common to DE courses. Students are expected to work through the online DE process at their own pace all the while following course timelines/deadlines.

Debbie Grove, who completed the CAAP Masters in Counselling program, described a very similar personal experience with online coursework:

You are able to read the materials, the coursework, the textbooks, and journal articles. Then you are able to think about that and reflect on it – thinking about what it means to you personally and to your work as a counsellor. Then you can integrate that before you go to type your responses to the rest of the class. For the whole week you're discussing those concepts and ideas with students and generating new ideas. It becomes this ongoing loop of ideas and resources and a way for you to reflect as a student, as a counsellor, as a person. (Athabasca University, 2004b, p. 24)
Undoubtedly, the amount of time spent on courses will vary depending on personal or professional commitments or obligations, assignments due, how much of the course the student is already familiar with, and the student's motivation level. The length of time required to complete a program varies depending on whether it is a degree, diploma, or certificate program and whether an individual is working on it full-time or part-time. With some investigation, prospective students can usually find the timeline of the course(s) they are interested in on the program's website.

Further, there are DE programs such as the CAAP program that include mandatory attendance at summer institutes (SI), practicum seminar weekends, or tutorials. Mandatory attendance at various times throughout a course or program provides students with an opportunity to meet and interact with fellow DE students and instructors and to receive some grounding and support. Students come together to reflect on and discuss, with fellow students and the instructor, the cases they are working on. This experience can be enriching and rewarding.

Similarly, Lunneborg (1994) described the OU UK as having special centres that organize tutorials, day schools, summer schools, and exams. Undergraduate students of the OU are required to attend at least one one-week period of summer school during the vacation months at various university campuses around the UK. There are also 250 local study centres throughout the UK where DE students can meet in a group setting or face-to-face with tutors and counsellors.

Many institutions are considered dual mode, which means they offer regular programs on a traditional campus and some courses in distance format. Bates (2000) referred to dual mode format as “the oldest and possibly most established form of distance education in higher education” (p. 1). Single-mode institutions offer DE exclusively.
Several of the largest, most reputable single-mode institutions in the world are the OU in England, the FernUniversitat in Germany, the UNED in Spain, the UNISA in South Africa, the National Technological University in the United States, Athabasca University (Canada’s Open University) and the Teleuniversite in Canada. In the “trends” section of this literature review you will find further information on what is occurring at the institutional level with dual and single mode universities and alliances/partnerships between universities.

DE has been viewed as an effective means of providing educational opportunities to those who are unable to attend traditional classroom-based instruction because of work or family commitments, because they are geographically removed from access to an institution or because of disabilities. "While not pretending to replace traditional education, distributed learning programs offer another dimension of opportunity to students who are better served by flexible schedules and workplaces" (Meyer-Peyton, 2000, p. 90).

Trends in Distance Education

Many trends in DE are documented in the literature. Broad trends in the area of Adult Learning (which can include DE) provide an overarching view of current changes in the world. Changing populations such as increases in the numbers of foreigners, immigrants, senior citizens, college-age students and adults pursuing higher education are placing increased demands on existing institutions. As well, changes in the workforce and the workplace are emphasizing the need for more well-trained, educated employees who are committed to lifelong learning. Further, given the rapid growth of technology and demand for DE many faculty members of institutions and the institutions themselves are
finding it challenging to adapt in various ways. The process of globalization influences economic, social, and cultural trends that inevitably affect the area of DE.

To begin with, Belanger and Tuijnman (1997) presented some of the broader trends they found in their six-country comparative study of Canada, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States. To mention each of these is beyond the scope of this paper; therefore, only a few of the more poignant trends related to this project inquiry are discussed.

Changes in Population. Since 1990 there has been an increase in the number of foreigners and immigrants living in the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States. Canada is an exception according to Belanger and Tuijnman (1997). Canada has experienced more migration during previous decades than the other countries. This increase in foreign-born populations necessitates the provision of second-language education and general and vocational adult education in order to successfully integrate these populations into the economies and societies of the aforementioned host countries.

In addition, the populations of Canada, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States are aging, and the ever-increasing number of senior citizens has serious implications for health care, social services, and pension systems. The increase in the population of older adults necessitates adult and continuing education in order to provide this unique population with the skills and resources they will need to manage effectively and successfully in society (Belanger & Tuijnman, 1997).

Changes in the Workforce. The workforce and workplace are drastically changing. Belanger and Tuijnman (1997) indicated that, in today's society, "high-performance" workplaces are on the rise, with an emphasis on:
Self-managing teams, study circles, flexible rather than narrow job design, flat organizational structures, employee problem-solving groups, information and office technologies, just-in-time learning and production, the ability to meet customer needs, and, particularly, innovation and total quality management. (p. 5)

In order to meet these demands, employees must be well-trained. Changes in the workforce, such as multiple career changes over a lifespan, various combinations of part-time work in multiple jobs, leaving and then re-entering the full-time workforce often because of family obligations, and traveling long distances to and from home each day or week, increases in temporary and part-time employment, and job market expectations for lifelong learning require commitment from individuals to participate in ongoing adult education and continuous learning (Belanger & Tuijnman, 1997). The growing interest in DE positively reflects trends in the workforce.

**Demand for Infrastructure.** In the area of DE trends in student enrolment, Howell, Williams, and Lindsay (2005) described capacity constraints of educational institutions in many countries in the world for the growing population of college-age students and enrollments for adults pursuing higher education. Oblinger, Barone, and Hawkins (2001) concurred and stressed that with the growing popularity and acceptance of DE, institutions are faced with the challenge that within the decade there will be more students than educational facilities can accommodate. Picciano (2001) added that "the most densely populated countries such as China and India, each with more than one billion people, will face the most severe shortages of schools" (p. 186). Because the higher education infrastructure will find it impossible to develop and expand facilities to keep up with the growing population of students, there will be a need for alternatives and more DE programs.
Changing Face of Students. A further trend documented in the area of DE was identified by Johnstone, Ewell, and Paulson (2002). They reported that students are spending time shopping around for an institution that meets their need for flexibility in their current life situation and where they can earn credits that they can then transfer to the university at which they will eventually earn their degree. Students are using their credits as a form of *academic currency*.

Howell, Williams, and Lindsay (2005) indicated that DE students' profiles are changing as well. A great majority of the students currently participating in DE are mature adults who are working at maintaining and upgrading their job skills. With advances in technology, the economy, and changes in the job market, workers are being forced to remain current and updated with their job skills in order to remain marketable (Picciano, 2001). Additionally, there is growing emphasis and demand in the workforce for workers committed to *lifelong learning*. Belanger and Tuijnman (1997) purported that "the intertwined processes of social, economic, and political transition necessitate lifelong learning; acquiring new knowledge and updating and expanding skills are critical to the well-being of individuals, economies, and societies" (p. 39).

DE Providers. Picciano (2001) indicated that the majority of "providers of education at all levels have been publicly funded or non-profit institutions" (p. 197). Many educational institutions have expanded their current programs in order to provide both traditional and DE courses. The 1990s witnessed the emergence and rapid growth of for-profit institutions offering various forms of DE, including remedial education, technology-oriented courses, and career development programs for adults (Picciano, 2001). These institutions and organizations are capitalizing on the new developments and opportunities available to them in the area of DE.
Picciano (2001) described strategies used by New York University (NYU), one of New York State's largest private and non-profit establishments, to generate profits. In October 1998, NYU announced plans to create a for-profit subsidiary that will develop and then sell specialized on-line courses to other colleges and corporate training centres, and will offer them directly to students who prefer to attend class at home. (p. 198)

Similarly, Srivastava (2002) reported that Athabasca University often leases its DE courses to other institutions. Howell, Williams, and Lindsay (2005) noted the distinct possibility that this type of development in DE might increase the competition amongst educational providers allowing for “new models and leaders to emerge” (p. 7).

Enrollment. Enrollment statistics in the area of DE indicate major increases in the number of students. Several mega universities, such as those situated in China, India, Pakistan, Korea, and Indonesia, are modeled after the OU UK and have a combined enrollment of more than two million students, with China's Radio and Television University Network's enrollment for 1975 at 850,000 students (Picciano, 2001). The astounding enrollment numbers of these Asian universities are indicators of the ever-increasing necessity for and importance and popularity of DE.

Partnerships/Alliances. The outsourcing of higher education and alliances between educational institutions is becoming more commonplace. Howell, Williams, and Lindsay (2005) reported the development of partnerships in large part to share technology and resources. Rayburn and Ramaprasad (2000) described the following three types of alliances:

1. Simple exchange, whereby schools only exchange needed courses in order to fill gaps in the curriculum.
2. *Partnership* (or consortia), which involves a more formal relationship. For example, a university may work with other schools or organizations to bring in a whole or partial program for students. The institutions in the partnership retain their own identities.

3. *Virtual universities* draw on multiple sources to develop a new identity, with member schools providing instruction and other necessary resources. (p. 72)

An excellent example of a partnership between universities is that of the CAAP: Counselling Initiative, which delivers a Master’s degree in Counselling Psychology using a primarily Web-based, summer school and weekend seminar format. This alliance between AU, the University of Calgary, and the University of Lethbridge was introduced in January, 2002 and is the first DE graduate counsellor program of its kind in Canada (Jerry, Demish & Collins, 2003). This innovative collaboration was “fuelled by a collective desire to enhance the accessibility, flexibility, and responsiveness of graduate counsellor education” (Collins, Hiebert, Magnusson & Bernes, 2000, p. 3). Collins et al. described a process whereby the aforementioned institutions’ relevant courses were reviewed collectively and the best features from each were utilized to develop new syllabuses for the CAAP program. As well, the governance model of this graduate program in counselling “takes collaboration to a new level by integrating and sharing all components of program development, implementation, and administration across three universities” (Collins et al., 2000, p. 7). Once completed the program, the successful graduate is granted a joint degree displaying the crest of each of the participating universities.
Who Are the Users of Distance Education?

Research reveals that more women than men in North America are enrolled in courses through DE. Generally the DE user is female, older than the typical undergraduate student (between the ages 25 and 35), employed full-time and married. Interesting findings by Belanger and Tuijnman (1997) indicated that "women who are working outside the household, who have a personal income, and who are at the highest level of formal educational attainment participate more than those who do not hold a job or who have low education" (p. 226).

In describing enrollment statistics, Kramarae (2001) stated that "the admission of women into colleges and universities has evolved from a statistical rarity to women slightly outnumbering men overall in undergraduate programs" (p. 4). This is true of AU. AU’s 2003/04 Annual Report revealed that over the past three years the demographic profile of undergraduate students has been consistent. Two-thirds of AU’s students are female and their average age is 29 years old. Numbers of undergraduates under the age of 25 are increasing and are currently at 44%. AU, Canada’s Open University, began offering graduate programs in 1994. Since 1994, statistics reveal that 50,000 courses have been taken by students from all over the world and that the majority of AU's graduate students are women and an average of 40 years old (Athabasca University, 2004a).

In contrast, the OU UK serves 125,000 registered students. An equal amount of individuals buy self-contained study packages one course at a time. At any given time the OU has 200,000 registered students.

Of these students:

- Almost half are women, the highest proportion of women students of any UK university.
• The majority are in their late twenties, thirties, or forties. The youngest are in their late teens; the oldest are in their nineties.

• Three in four students are in paid employment throughout their studies.

• One in five students starting undergraduate study has the minimum two A-levels needed for other universities; nearly half have no A-levels at all.

• Half had fathers in blue-collar occupations (compared with one in five at conventional universities). (Lunneborg, 1994, p. 137)

Various types of users are well documented in the DE literature. von Prummer (2000) identified users of DE as women in the childrearing phase; individuals who are largely excluded from education at all levels on the grounds of class, ethnicity, gender, or age; and individuals who lack mobility due to physical disability or private circumstances.

Geographical isolation is a major barrier to traditional education. Many individuals cannot attend classroom-based instruction at higher education institutions due to geographical isolation. These people are often far removed from large urban centres and live and work in small country towns on farms and in factories (New South Wales, India, Alaska, Canada – rural areas in the prairies and north). Some are prisoners (Anwyl, Powles & Patrick, 1987).

Australia's population is widely distributed geographically and cities are quite distant from one another. Challenging travelling conditions such as bad roads and public transport, and high costs of fuel hampers mobility and restricts access to health and welfare services and educational institutions (Heiler & Richards, 1988). In India, 80% of the population lives in villages in rural areas that lack communications and basic facilities (Trivedi, 1988). Indian villages are scattered all over the country. Many of the 850,000 villages are in remote northern mountain provinces which are inaccessible by vehicle,
train, or road (Ramani, 1988; Picciano, 2001) therefore individuals with limited access to higher education institutions are considering alternative means of obtaining education.

Illiteracy rates in developing countries are high, especially in areas that are geographically isolated. Ramani (1988) described 70% of the women in India as illiterate or semi-illiterate and residing in rural areas of the country. The majority of these women “would not have even seen the four walls of a school because of the general belief in villages that “women are more useful at home doing housework, cooking, and looking after younger members of the family than they are with knowledge of the alphabets” (p. 92).

Srivastava (2002) asserted that enrollment statistics in DE in India point to an imbalance in the numbers of urban vs. rural students in the university systems, reflecting an overall urban bias in favor of urban students. Srivastava expressed the need for Indian OUs to make a more concerted effort to recruit rural students, including those identified from scheduled castes and scheduled tribes (social groups). Scheduled castes and scheduled tribes are:

Communities that are accorded special status by the Constitution of India. These communities were considered 'outcastes' and were excluded from the Chaturvarna system that was the social superstructure of Hindu society in the Indian subcontinent for thousands of years. These castes and tribes were relegated to the most menial labour, with no possibility of upward mobility and denigrated into the most economically and socially backward of communities in the region. (Wikipedia, 2005, p. 1)

For women in rural villages with restricted mobility and access to all levels of education, DE via broadcast radio has become a valuable source of information. Women
fortunate enough to possess this luxury can learn personal health and development information, basic and functional literacy skills, and/or work on primary schooling through to higher education from their huts.

Aboriginal women have also been identified as users of DE. Faith (1988) described the employment and educational opportunities of the Aboriginal women of Canada as bleak. Sixty percent of the Aboriginal population reside in rural areas on reserves on the prairies and in the north. Access to tertiary education is often inhibited by geographical isolation (Srivastava, 2002) and "relatively early marriages, large families and close ties to and dependence on a close-knit network of kin and affines" (Spronk & Radtke, 1988, p. 215). Obligations to community and to neighbouring reserves during community events (weddings, deaths) allow little time for educational pursuits. Nevertheless, full-time education is often the only source of monies for status Native women on the reserve, as the Federal Department of Indian Affairs pays tuition fees and subsistence allowance (Spronk & Radtke, 1988). Srivastava (2002) indicated that, although the educational outcomes of Aboriginal Canadians are gradually improving, they are still below those of non-Aboriginals. For many of the Aboriginal women of Canada who choose to remain on the reserve or who believe they have no choice but to live on the reserve, DE is becoming a more viable means of attaining higher education.

Additionally, the women of the Gobi Desert in Mongolia and their families live quite primitively in harsh environmental conditions where the weather can range from plus 30°C degrees to minus 30°C degrees below in one day. A great majority of husbands are in the army, gone to the city to find employment, or have been killed in desert dust storms. These nomadic women and their families are utilizing DE through broadcast radio
to provide support and practical advice on basic agricultural and economic techniques that are "required for survival in this post-centralist era" (Russell, 1994, p. 1).

Picciano (2001) further identified the following groups of individuals as users of DE because of restricted mobility and/or access to educational facilities. They are: fisherman in Iceland who spend weeks at sea, inhabitants of hundreds of islands that make up the country of Indonesia, workers needing to maintain or update their employability skills, military personnel, Native Americans/Alaskan Natives and Non-English speaking individuals.

Anwyl, Powles, and Patrick (1987) and Picciano (2001) both recognized barriers to higher education for individuals with certain physical disabilities. However, Stevenson (2000) stated that "evolving accessibility standards and technology (in DE) can help people with visual impairments, color blindness, hearing and speech impairments, cognitive and language impairments (such as dyslexia), mobility impairments (such as hand and limb injuries, or arthritis) and seizure disorders" (p. 92). For individuals with hearing loss, the OU UK provides "induction courses on study skills, subtitled video recordings, transcripts of broadcast programs, and the loan of radio aids and other technical equipment" (Richardson, Long, & Foster, 2004, p. 83).

Moisey (2003) described a “groundbreaking initiative” developed to provide a combination of DE communication and information technologies via a user-friendly website to adults with developmental disabilities and their families/guardians in Northeastern Alberta. The NorthEast Community Online website (http://www.ne-community.com) was introduced in November, 2001, and provides information in the area of housing, employment, leisure, support services, and education (life skills, basic literacy, primary to higher education). This resource empowers individuals with developmental
disabilities and their families/guardians and allows for “the ability…to be well informed, to make their needs and views known, and to participate in community-based policy and decision-making” (Moisey, 2005, p. 3). As well, this virtual community enhances quality of life by providing a supportive and encouraging online meeting place. Moisey (2003) indicated that this website has been accessed worldwide from the U.S., Europe, Australia and New Zealand, Africa, Oceania, the Middle East, and Asia.

Individuals with disabling conditions such as multiple chemical sensitivities (MCS) are seeking alternatives to traditional classroom environments. MCS is an adverse reaction that individuals have to chemicals that are present in the air, water, food, drugs, and environment. Examples include aerosol air fresheners and deodorants, colognes and perfumes, cigarette smoke, diesel exhaust and fuel, hair sprays, shampoo, and laundry detergent. Individuals with this condition attempt to avoid these chemicals by withdrawing from friends, family, work, and activities and by staying inside their home. There is heated controversy around this condition. Medical doctors disagree with clinical ecologists because they believe there is not enough clear scientific or biological evidence for the condition and that MCS patients are instead struggling with psychological disorders such as depression, anxiety, and bodily reactions to stress. Nevertheless, for individuals who cannot access educational institutions without becoming ill, DE is an opportunity and a valuable way to earn academic credentials (About.com, 2005; Magill & Suruda, 1998).

Because access to higher education is often difficult due to shift work, nurses are major users of DE (Anwyl, Powles & Patrick, 1987). They use it as a means of updating their professional expertise and skills in the area of health care. Nurses who work in rural areas are often geographically isolated from universities and colleges, and are therefore dependent on technology in accessing professional development. There are various types
of DE nursing courses identified in the literature including Community Health nursing whereby nurses develop health promotion projects such as smoking cessation and incentive programs for fitness. Other courses include Anatomy and Physiology, Nutrition, Clinical Epidemiology, Health Care Relationships, and Information Systems in Health Care. There are also many journals indicating the vast use of DE by nurses including: the *Nurse Educator, Journal of Nursing Education, Journal of Advance Nursing, The Journal of Continuing Education in Nursing, and Computers*Informatics*Nursing (CIN).*

von Prummer (2000) indicated that "since the early days of open and distance universities, women have been seen as forming one of their primary constituencies" (p. 1). These women often had restricted access to traditional education because they were responsible for sick or elderly relatives. "The original target groups of distance education efforts were adults with occupational, social, and family commitments. This remains the primary target group today" (Schlosser & Anderson, 1994, p. 4).

Why Do Women Choose Distance Education?

Women learners choose DE for a variety of reasons. It is an opportunity for independent study with freedom in relation to time and place of study for those unable to attend traditional classroom based instruction.

As mentioned in the Introduction, illiteracy rates among women are exceptionally high, especially in countries such as India and Africa and in the Pacific cultures. This is partly due to geographical isolation and sociocultural sanctions. Education, especially higher education, for women in these countries is discouraged. For many of these women DE is a means of survival; learning about personal development, family health, and wellness is a necessity. Specific examples of DE topics taught via radio communications include productive agricultural and economical practices and basic literacy skills (Mehran,
1999; Russell, 1994), birth control, stages of child development and the need for vaccinations, eliminating the spread of diseases such as AIDS and influenza, and proper food handling and preparation. For these women, DE provides them with knowledge of basic human rights and, albeit slowly, is increasing the possibilities for equal opportunities and social justice for all women.

Statistics reveal that the majority of distance learners in North America are women who are often managing multiple life roles. Many women are attracted to the flexibility and accessibility of DE and its potential for attainment alongside childrearing. For women who have committed to raising their children or caring for elders in the home (White, 2001), pursuing an education by DE is seen as ideal.

Johnson, Schwartz, and Bower (2000) found that adult female students are often motivated to return to school as a result of pivotal life events such as job loss, divorce or death of a spouse/partner, and career limitations due to lack of education. Many are forced to go back to school due to the need for economic security (White, 2001).

Substantial motivators for pursuing DE are identified in the DE literature. Rezabek's (1999) study described college students' rationale or motivation for pursuing and participating in DE via various methods (e.g., interactive television courses, guided self-study courses). Of the 23 students interviewed, 20 were women and ranged in age from 19 to 50 years old. Motives included: a desire for a better life than their current circumstances; a sense of dissatisfaction with their current or past jobs (these individuals eventually wanted a better or more enjoyable job, better pay, better benefits, and opportunities for advancement); wanting to increase their self-esteem and self-confidence; a desire to gain respect from others; a desire to achieve and accomplish "something," such as obtaining a degree, a new career, learning, or specific domain knowledge; a
combination of getting a degree, a new job, and learning or knowledge. Several of these students were uncertain as to what they hoped to achieve other than to earn a degree, and some were motivated to participate in DE because of a *triggering event* in their lives such as divorce, the death of someone, an argument or fight, or a dare or challenge. Rezabek (1999) concluded that “the motives, goals, and life experiences that act as precursors to a student's decision to enrol may be numerous and complex” (p. 98) which is evident in his research.

Results from von Prummer’s (2000) study provided the following family-centered rationale for women pursuing DE.

- The woman originally had planned to do a university degree but was prevented from doing so by marriage or pregnancy. Her enrollment in a DE degree programme is her chance to begin or to complete her studies.
- The woman may or may not have started or completed a previous degree course, but she now feels that she needs (another) degree in order to better her chances for (re-) entry into the labour market. Her distance studying serves the purpose of gaining better occupational qualifications.
- The woman wants to use the knowledge gained in her DE programme directly for her own family, possibly because she needs it to help her children with their homework or because she feels it would contribute to her understanding of child development. (p. 186-187)

Throughout the DE literature it is found that women’s decisions to pursue and participate in DE very often revolve around family life circumstances and considerations. Most often women must adjust their own academic schedule around family and work. This may be in part due to the fact that male partners generally earn higher incomes than
females; therefore, it is compromised that their employent must not be sacrificed or disturbed in any way.

Flexibility is a key determinant in a woman’s decision to pursue DE. DE allows for a high degree of flexibility for individuals pursuing education for professional purposes or as part of their leisure pursuits. Various types of flexibility that are of benefit and appeal to DE learners are described by Race (1998). *Flexibility of start and end dates* allows for the freedom to incorporate DE into a busy home life or work schedule when the time is right for the student. *Flexibility in entry levels* allows learners to analyse course prerequisites, assess prior learning, knowledge, and skills, and then to determine if and how they will work through their coursework. *Flexibility of choice in how much support student will access* allows learners to determine if, when, or how much they will utilize tutor support. For some students regular feedback on how their learning is going is welcome. *Flexibility in regards to student motivation levels* allows students to determine how much energy they will put into various aspects of their DE course/program. Depending on prior learning and knowledge DE students may decide what to skip altogether in their coursework. *Flexibility in pace* allows DE learners to set their own pace dependent on life and work circumstances. *Flexibility of location* allows students to decide where they will participate in the various course activities. *Flexibility in choice of learning environment* allows students choices in the type of atmosphere that is most preferable, comfortable, or conducive to learning. *Flexibility in determining how important a part information technology will play in their studies* allows students who are resistant to using technology in their studies to select from various options (e.g., home study – correspondence). *Flexibility for learners to work collaboratively or on an individual basis* allows students to determine if and how much time they will spend communicating and
interacting with their classmates. As well, Race found that added benefits of DE for learners include being able to see what the standards of the program are, becoming more confident, and knowing where you are heading in life.

Similar to Race’s (1998) findings, Draves concluded that learners can learn at whatever speed they are most comfortable. They can "replay a portion of audio, reread a unit, review a video, and retest him or herself" (as cited in Gilbert, 2001, p. 206) if they choose. With traditional classes there may be only one opportunity to hear a lecture. The second benefit indicated by Draves is that learners can take as much time as necessary or as they desire on certain content areas of a course as opposed to traditional education, where the focus is divided equally among units, chapters, or sections. The third benefit is that learners can test their knowledge through quizzes and tests, with instant results indicating their progress.

Kramarae's (2001) study echoed the earlier findings of Rezabek (1999), Race (1998), and Draves (Gilbert, 2001), and provided extremely significant and relevant information in the area of DE and women, for this final project. Kramarae (2001) collected data over a 16-month period from 534 participants (481 women, 53 men). She utilized in-depth interviewing and an online questionnaire. Participants included women re-entering academia, potential online students, and teachers and administrators interested in the possibilities and problems of online learning. Questions revolved around access to the resources needed for online learning, learning styles, best and worst educational experiences, and experiences, worries, and successes regarding online education.

When asked whether they preferred online or traditional classes, 175 women in Kramarae's (2001) study indicated they preferred online courses. These women appreciated the flexibility of DE, including the ability to control their time, their schedules
and study pace. Some women enjoyed the actual experience of online learning. Several
women described a preference for studying from home, which saved the "time, costs, and
hassle of commuting to colleges many miles away" (p. 12). Some women preferred not to
travel in adverse weather conditions and several reported that studying online from home
helped reduce childcare costs.

The majority of the women in Kramarae's (2001) study indicated that they preferred
independent rather than collaborative study. Several women reported they learn best "by
first reading, researching, and writing and then participating in group discussions to hear
other opinions and ideas" (p. 18). One woman expressed lower levels of self-assurance
when participating in group work, describing her tendency to allow dominant members to
take control of the group. Some women prefer to study independently because they "can
count on themselves more than anyone else" (p. 18).

The more mature women in Kramarae's (2001) study expressed a greater degree of
comfort with online learning than with on-campus learning due to their age and comfort
level around the typical university student. They felt they were better able to communicate
and relate to students closer to their age. Many of these women preferred to spend their
free time with their families rather than in social activity. As well, many participants in the
study found comfort in the fact that negative assumptions and biases based on appearance
including age, skin, color, gender, hair styles, clothing, speech, and physical disabilities
are missing in online communication discussions and, because students and teachers
cannot see each other, there is virtually no opportunity for racism, sexism, or homophobia.

Kramarae (2001) labelled women and their motivations for wanting to or taking
online courses. The largest group (more than 1/3) in the study of 375 women were
considered *degree seekers* who valued the credential they were working towards and the
personal enrichment they derived from taking online courses. They were using their
degree as a stepping stone in their academic or occupational journey. The *pragmatists* (the
second largest group) described needing to take classes in order to further their career. The
*reluctant users* (the third largest group) expressed uncertainty about and reluctance to
taking online courses. If the latter had a choice they would prefer not to take online
learning. The *lifelong learners* (the fourth largest group) took courses because they
enjoyed the process of learning. They gained personal and professional fulfillment from
taking courses. The *interested poor* (the fifth largest group) would have liked to take
online courses, but could not afford to do so. The *career changers* took courses because
they wanted to "make their lives better (financially and emotionally) for themselves or for
their children" (p. 10). The last group was identified as the *disappointed* because they
could not find the courses that they desired online.

Furst-Bowe and Dittman (2001) identified being a role model for family members as
an advantage/motivator in pursuing DE. The privacy of home study/working alone
(Leiper, 1993) and gaining cultural knowledge have been identified as reasons for
pursuing DE. Rezabek (1999) maintained that students' "motives for enroling and other
factors in their decision may have a significant impact on their ultimate success, their
satisfaction, as well as ability to persist with the distance learning experience" (p. 27).

In his thesis that describes *The Emergence of the Open University Concept in
Alberta*, Runte (1981) established that DE students find Athabasca University to be
accessible in a number of ways. His findings were in contrast to the finding of other
researchers. He described the OU concept as allowing for adults who do not qualify for
entrance at other universities or who do not want to follow the set programs of other
institutions to earn credits toward undergraduate or graduate courses or degrees. Runte’s
study found that tuition was considered affordable by most individuals, except for the least well off. Another advantage is that DE students can pay for their courses as they go as opposed to yearly or per semester payment made at a traditional university. Students can continue to work full-time while earning a post-secondary degree, which helps reduce the financial burden. As well, they can apply for extensions in each course or delay their studies if necessary.

In describing the flexibility and accessibility of DE through the OU UK, Lunneborg (1994) stressed that "traditional universities ask mature women to fit with them. The OU says, instead, I will fit with you" (p. 103). For example, Gertrude Mtandabari had an ear operation in 1982 that left her deaf in one ear and consequently interfered with her nursing career. Gertrude needed a way to study that allowed her to work and be at home with her two sons, took her disability into account, and enabled her to circumvent the challenge that English as a second language presented her. OU provided her with opportunities not available at a traditional university.

**Issues Women Experience in Distance Education**

DE literature consistently shows that non-completion and dropout rates of DE students are higher than those of traditional classroom-based students (Carr, 2000; Schrum, 2000). This is partly due to the barriers and stressors they face. These inhibitors place undue pressure on students, causing attrition and then non-completion of courses/programs and underscore the rationale for the development of this final project and resultant guidebook for women in DE.

Three types of barriers consistently identified in the DE literature are Cross's (1981) dispositional, situational, and institutional barriers to participation in adult education. Missing from Cross’s model are sociocultural barriers which are significant and which
will be addressed in this section. Each of these aforementioned barriers can undoubtedly affect the student’s decision to enrol and participate in higher education. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Bioecological model suggests that there are differing effects of the various levels of environment on the student’s development and vice versa. Such as, dispositional and situational barriers affect proximal processes within the microsystem layer and between the microsystem and mesosystem levels. Bronfenbrenner’s model indicated bi-directional influences are strongest and have the greatest impact on the student at the microsystem level which is the student’s immediate environment. Institutional barriers occur mainly in the exosystem layer. This layer defines the larger system and impacts the student’s development by interacting with some structure in the microsystem but does not have the same impact on the student as the microsystem. Sociocultural barriers occur more so at the macrosystem level which is the outermost layer in the model and farthest away from the student. The effects of sociocultural values and ideologies has a cascading influence throughout the layers and although influences an individual to a great degree, the student has less impact/influence in changing these larger principles. Understanding the effects of the student on their environment and vice versa is worthwhile when examining the various barriers to participation in adult education.

Information found in the area of situational barriers was overwhelming thus will be addressed at length. Information gathered during the comprehensive literature review have been tied to Cross’s (1981) categorizations with the addition of sociocultural barriers.

**Dispositional Barriers.** Dispositional barriers include learner's ideas about themselves and their abilities. In a 1974 study, conducted by Carp, Peterson, and Roelfs, they found that potential learners failed to participate in learning activities because of the following dispositional barriers which included feeling afraid one was too old to begin;
anxiety and low confidence about past poor grades; not enough energy and stamina; dislike of studying; no enthusiasm or motivation to attend classes; unsure of interests and consequences of learning; and hesitant to seem too ambitious. Rezabek (1999) substantiated these findings in his study of barriers for those who enrol in DE courses. Although the above barriers recognized by Carp et al. were discovered more than 30 years ago they are still applicable to adult learner participation today.

A significant dispositional barrier noted in the DE literature is the lack of self-confidence. This is especially true of older women re-entering education. They have many doubts about how well they will be able to manage the learning process, such as studying and retaining knowledge. They often experience fear and anxiety at the thought of competing with younger students and have many reservations about utilizing technologies that are new and unfamiliar to them. Poor health and lack of motivation are additional dispositional barriers. Ellen Davies, a previous student of the OU UK, reported that when she decided to pursue DE in 1980 for the first time at 27 years old her own low expectations of self were an obstacle:

There are also the expectations of other people, or the lack of expectations. When I started doing the OU, a lot of people said 'What are you doing that for? Who do you think you are?' A bit like you had delusions of grandeur, or you weren't satisfied with life as it was with them (Lunneborg, 1994, p. 34).

Ellen Davies negative evaluation of her potential to succeed in DE was a barrier she overcame in order to pursue and complete DE courses/program. A further challenge she surmounted was the perceived threat those around her felt with her decision to embark on higher education.
Situational Barriers. Situational barriers arise from an individual's life situation. Carp, Peterson, and Roelfs (1974) identified the following situational barriers in their research: cost, including tuition, books, childcare, and so on; not enough time; home responsibilities; job responsibilities; no childcare; no transportation; no place to study or practice; and friends or family don't like the idea.

One of the most powerful situational barriers described in the DE literature is the lack of emotional support of the DE student from family members (Rezabek, 1999). von Prummer (2000) has conducted substantial research into the area of female DE students and the challenges they face. She found that female DE students are often made to feel guilty and neglectful by their children and partner for pursuing their education. As a result women will demand more from themselves in order to compensate for what is perceived by those around them as selfishness. For some female DE students, gaining knowledge is seen as a threat to the balance of power in the home and a threat to their husbands, who would like them to remain "subservient and domesticated" (Morgan, as cited in von Prummer, 2000, p. 74).

von Prummer (2002) reported that, when female DE students register, rather than having some of their responsibilities relieved by family members, they often have increased demands placed on them. Male DE students, on the other hand, indicated that they are often excused from household and childcare responsibilities and given a substantial amount of quiet time for studying. Male students also report being assisted by their partner with research or typing up of research papers/assignments.

Women are often at a disadvantage, for they must carry the extra load of a degree course with their job as well as with domestic duties and possibly childcare. Kramarae (2001) indicated that women feel it is primarily their responsibility to take care of the
educational, emotional, and medical needs of their child/ren and partner. Men generally have limited responsibilities and do not have to carry the multiple loads of domestic labour and childcare alongside work and education. von Prummer's (2002) research indicated that "in cases where there is a partner, the domestic and parenting work is not shared equally, and the double or triple burden of family and paid work always is the woman's responsibility" (p. 57).

One major assumption regarding women and DE is that DE is particularly suited to unemployed women and stay-at-home mothers, as they have more disposable time on their hands and can easily plan their educational schedule around their everyday home life. It is assumed that many of the tasks involved in housework and childrearing are easily accomplished and take very little time, effort, or planning. von Prummer (2002) maintained:

This view ignores the character of domestic labour and childcare, both of which are extremely fragmented and subject to external pressures. Specifically, it does not address the reality of those women who are mothers and have to be ready to react immediately to direct and indirect demands from their child or children. (p. 65)

Kramarae (2001) and Rezabek (1999) concurred those women who study online have less time for themselves than traditional students. Kramarae further described a female DE student’s schedule in shifts. She indicated that her first shift occurs outside the home at her place of employment, the second occurs as the primary caretaker of family members in the home, and the third shift (working on their education) happens whenever she can fit it into her busy schedule.

Women must overcome greater obstacles than men in order to earn academic credentials. They must deal with family dissonance, extreme and hectic workloads, and
inner turmoil. "They have fewer resources but more responsibilities, less support from their family and more scruples about the legitimacy of getting an education for themselves" (von Prummer, 2000, p. 203). Considering the unrealistic expectations women place on themselves and those that are placed on them by others it is easy to see why attrition rates are high. With such pressure there is a real danger of the female DE student abandoning her studies before she has reached her educational goals.

Female DE students often complain that they do not have a place they can call their own to study. There are few quiet areas in the home where they can go to read and concentrate on their studies. Constant interruptions make learning a challenge. Quite often these students are utilizing the family computer, which is situated in a heavy traffic area, and must schedule their study time around their family's computer usage. Those with workstations often have to contend with spilled drinks, sticky candy messes, and disruption of their educational materials.

Access to computer technology can be another major situational barrier for female DE students. von Prummer (2000) indicated in her research that three factors influence a woman's access to technology.

- The first factor is economic, since women generally have less control over the family income and tend to be in lower-paying jobs.
- The second factor is based on gender effects in the education and socialization of girls and boys, resulting in women being less knowledgeable and/or less confident with respect to their own technical competence, and therefore more willing to leave such expensive decisions to their male partner.
- The third factor is that men are more likely to use the computer more extensively and that it therefore seems justified that they should choose the kind of
equipment purchased for use by themselves and their other family members. (p. 129)

von Prummer (2000) purported that women and men's views differ in regards to technology and learning about technology. Men more often learn by doing and by reading manuals or handbooks, or by accessing online help, as opposed to women who often feel they do not have the time or the desire and would prefer to seek help from other people. Further, female DE students are also less confident in their ability to use technology and consider themselves less competent than men. Men often consider themselves as experts in the area of technology. Unfortunately, the views women hold regarding their abilities in utilizing technologies can serve to undermine their success in DE studies.

Financing studies can prove to be a significant barrier for many women returning to higher education (Rezabek, 1999). These women have often devoted their time to raising their children and have decided to go back to school to gain an education, only to find there are limited financial options available to them. Women who have been employed and wish to pursue further education are often met with the reluctance of some employers to provide them with feasible financial options such as paid education leave or part-time work. Sperling (1989) reported that in the United Kingdom the student loan system is biased against women, giving priority to students who have been studying full-time for 3 consecutive years. Women interested in traditional women’s areas are given lower priority and most often need to use their welfare benefits and household operation monies to pay for their DE studies and childcare. Similarly, in Canada, lending institutions are reluctant to lend money to DE students unless they are working full-time.

Institutional Barriers. Institutional barriers include "practices and procedures that exclude or discourage working adults from participating in educational activities" (Cross,
1981, p. 98). Carp, Peterson, and Roelfs (1974) identified several institutional barriers in their study, including: not wanting to go to school full time; too much time necessary to complete program; the courses are not scheduled when individual can attend; no information available about offerings; strict attendance requirements; courses do not seem to be available; too much red tape in getting enrolled; do not meet necessary requirements of program; and no way to get credit or a degree.

Other significant institutional barriers documented in the DE literature are program costs, lack of resource availability and technical assistance, lack of equipment and infrastructure, instructional concerns, physical access to library services and scheduling or registration assistance. In many cases, the institution is too far away from the adult learner (Rezabek, 1999).

Sociocultural Barriers. Sociocultural barriers, as previously mentioned, were not specifically addressed in Cross’s (1981) barriers to participation in adult education. These barriers are significant when considering women’s participation in adult education as these are views that are ingrained in society and culture and most difficult for women to overcome (Orr & Wong-Wylie, in review). Women can overcome dispositional and situational barriers because they are more immediate and at the microsystem and mesosystem levels of environment; but facing and surmounting society’s and cultural views, which occur in the larger exosystem and macrosystem levels, are far more daunting and challenging. Sociocultural barriers include multiple and conflicting roles of women; the disregard placed on educating women in various cultures; and androcentrism.

One of the greatest challenges and primary sources of stress for women students all over the world (Canada, United States, Australia, Israel, Papua New Guinea, and India) comes from the multiple and often conflicting roles they must play in their daily lives.
Read, Elliott, Escobar and Slaney (1988) asserted that the various roles of mother, partner, and employee may be somewhat overwhelming at times and considering becoming a DE student (possibly out of necessity) may cause further distress and guilt.

To illustrate, in Israel, a young woman who marries a fellow student is expected to postpone her own tertiary studies and work full-time to support her husband's studies. Once he has completed his studies and begins working full-time he will support her while she pursues her education further. "In many cases, however, these plans are never carried out, and at the age of 30 the woman finds herself with a half-finished degree, a feeling of frustration and failure plus the responsibility for young children" (Enoch, 1988, p. 67).

Although DE is a possibility, the student must look at whether she can transfer credits already earned, the time commitment and effort required to complete formal education, whether she plans to have more children and how that fits in with education, and family acceptance of her decision to pursue further studies. These considerations are not “black and white”. They need a lot of reflection and communication with significant others.

A further sociocultural barrier is that education for women is viewed negatively in various cultures. In many cultures education is not seen as being important and a woman's decision to pursue further education is frowned upon. For example, education for women in Papua New Guinea (PNG) is not typically seen as valuable, especially for those who live in rural areas. Mandie-Filer (1988) described that the cultural, social, and political systems of PNG expect that women will marry, have children, and take on family and household responsibilities. Education for women in this culture is considered a threat to the family well being and the family responsibilities by men and women alike. Attending traditional schooling away from home is perceived as wasteful and disapproved of but as urbanization occurs the demand for educated workers increases and women are
reconsidering their "position" in society and looking at feasible options in the area of education.

Furthermore, androcentrism as a significant barrier in DE is well documented. von Prummer (2000) insisted:

The persisting androcentrism, which either ignores these (gender) differences or sets the male experience as the norm to which women have to adapt, limits the benefits which women can derive from the educational opportunities offered through open and distance learning. (p. 47)

Women are the primary users of DE, yet they are regularly discriminated against. Female students are often seen by men, including university faculty members, as "unreliable and uncommitted students whose home responsibilities always take precedence over studying" (Edwards, 1990 as cited in Lunneborg, 1994, p. 101). Women's domestic responsibilities are often devalued and considered trivial because they are seen as inherent in women's nature (Lunneborg, 1994).

There are very few women in positions of authority in the area of DE. They are consistently underrepresented in the areas of administration, management, and academic staff (Kramarae, 2001; von Prummer, 2000). To a great extent, women are not involved in "producing technological solutions and designing technological delivery systems, software, and educational packages" (Kramarae, p. 5) and a great majority of teaching materials are written by men from a male perspective.

Summary. Female DE students are destined to come up against many challenges and barriers as they proceed into the world of DE. They may be faced with self-defeating thoughts about their abilities. Their families may disagree with their decision to pursue higher education. They may be confronted with unrealistic societal and cultural views and
expectations of women that can be debilitating. Many of these challenges will either deter potential DE students from enrolling and participating in DE or make them more resilient and determined to pursue tertiary studies and succeed. "A wide variety of evidence from different countries supports the conclusion that distance education, while involving a degree of risk – to the stability of families and relationships and to personal self-esteem, etc. – nevertheless offers opportunities to women which, on balance, are worth taking" (von Prummer, 2000, p. 1).
CHAPTER V
Synthesis and Implications

This literature review provided an in-depth overview of the ever-developing and expanding area of DE as well as the issues women face when considering participation in DE. The intent of this phase of the final project was to provide general knowledge of women and DE, how DE has evolved and the current trends in DE. The author revealed who the various users of DE are and why they choose to pursue DE. The author discussed challenges female DE students experience when considering enrolling or participating in DE, including the well-documented dispositional, situational, institutional and sociocultural barriers.

The author utilized Cross’s (1981) Chain of Response model as well as research Cross conducted in the area of barriers to participation in adult learning in developing this final project. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Bioecological model worked well with Cross’s model to indicate that a student’s overall development is affected by various levels of environment and that the various categories of barriers will impact the student to varying degrees. The author believed that it was important for the student to be examined and considered “in context” for this project.

From the issues uncovered in the literature review, the author developed a guidebook entitled Fostering Connections: Guidebook for Women in DE (Appendix A). The goal of this guidebook is to provide female DE graduate students with guidance and strategies they can use to manage the impact of the aforementioned barriers. The effect of these barriers on the biopsychosocial well-being of female DE students is stress; therefore, the author has provided information on what stress is and strategies students can use to
alleviate stress. Examples of these strategies include communication skills, time management, and organizational skills. The strategies described in the guidebook were identified in the literature and in informal discussions with other female graduate students and peers. The majority of these were also used by the author at some point during her graduate studies.

The guidebook was developed to be used as a pull-out section of the final project. As such, some repetition from the proceeding literature review was unavoidable. The guidebook can be printed and provided as a hard copy resource to female students; as a PDF in the CAAP program; to female students just considering or just beginning the program; or to other DE programs to use as a resource for their female students.

There is an emphasis in this guidebook on fostering connections. For the female DE student, fostering connections is critical to her success. Fostering connections with other DE students, family members, community, and faculty will provide her with the emotional and network support she will need during her studies.

The content of this guidebook may significantly impact female DE students of any graduate program and those around her by providing her with knowledge and insight around DE university culture and what to expect in her DE program, thus alleviating some of the stress she will encounter in higher education. DE students' families will hopefully benefit from students' ability to work with and moderate stress levels; and DE instructors will encounter healthier, prepared female students in their courses.

Strengths. This guidebook provides accessible, cost-effective, practical advice on managing the impact of the various barriers and stressors female DE students are likely to experience. The author seriously considered the literature as well as the information she found helpful as a mother, employee, and DE student while working towards her graduate
degree; this guidebook is the result of a genuine effort to include as many relevant, clear, and common-sense strategies for alleviating stressors as possible.

The author attempted to weave a multicultural thread throughout this project. Issues that female DE students of diverse cultures were addressed as well as general strategies they could utilize to become successful in their studies. Success stories of female DE students from around the world were chosen to reflect the courage, strength, resilience, and perseverance inherent in all those who desire education. The guidebook will hopefully ease female DE students’ feelings of isolation by showing that others have many of the same concerns and challenges. Additionally, this guidebook aims to improve the overall experience of women DE students. It will provide them with insight and awareness as to how they can become empowered and active through research, critical thinking, and writing during their studies.

Limitations. There exists a vast amount of literature to wade through in the area of DE. The author identified several areas as relevant and playing an essential role in the success of the DE student, but that were beyond the scope of this project. These topics include:

- theories in the area of DE learning, learning styles, learner characteristics, self-directed learners, and motivation of the learner;
- multiple role strain and complexities (influencing factors, including number and ages of children, income);
- effects of isolation on the DE student; and
- accessibility issues in DE (technology, financial, disabilities).
DE and disability issues in general, are under-researched; though this was not a focus of this project, the author identifies this as an area of limitation and a much needed area for further exploration.

The author did not provide many statistics regarding women’s participation, attrition and discontinuation rates in DE due to the fact that statistics vary in each country. Various cultures differ in regards to the expectations of women and perception of education for women. Economies, urbanization, and geography all play a part in DE enrollment statistics. As well, there are numerous types of DE courses and programs, some involving on-campus participation, some completely online, and some mixed variations. There is a vast array of courses, from basic literacy skills courses to graduate level programs. Men and women tend to steer toward gender-based courses and programs, which may be a topic for further study.

The information presented in this comprehensive literature review and the resulting guidebook can be of great benefit to prospective graduate students who are considering DE but have not taken the plunge. For students who are considering higher education, but are leery of DE, the literature review aims to confirm that DE is a legitimate means of education and comparable in many ways to traditional education. It is flexible, accessible, and a great opportunity for many people around the world.

The guidebook can be a valuable, practical resource for students and their families when considering DE in that it provides insight into and understanding of some of the issues/barriers/stressors they might encounter and specific, useful strategies for overcoming them if they choose to pursue DE. As well, administrators, developers of DE programs, and faculty may become more aware of, and understanding of, what DE students are experiencing and work towards minimizing some of these barriers. They can
provide the guidebook as a practical resource to their students as part of the orientation process in their DE programs.

As well, further exploration could be concentrated in the area of barriers for women in DE specifically Cross’s (1981) barriers to participation in adult learning were not specific to women and did not address sociocultural barriers which are significant in the life of the female DE student.

As DE is continually evolving, so are the barriers and needs of female DE students. The guidebook could be used as a foundation by DE programs and/or their students to be further developed over time.

The author hopes that this project will impact, not only DE students but their partners, children, families, and communities by encouraging success in DE.
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Appendix

Fostering Connections: Guidebook for Women in Distance Education:
Fostering Connections: Guidebook for Women in Distance Education:

Written by Rose Ann Swanson

Campus Alberta Applied Psychology: Counselling Initiative

Supervised by Dr. Gina Wong-Wylie

November, 2005
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Introduction

Women are, and always have been, the primary users of Distance Education (DE). I have been a DE student for 15+ years, so when the opportunity arose to develop a resource in the form of a guidebook for other female DE students embarking on DE, I embraced it. I felt it extremely important to consider other women’s experiences in developing the guidebook and my aim is to assist in making the DE process go more smoothly for female graduate DE students in general. This author hopes you find the following information advantageous and valuable on your DE journey.

To begin with, the literature cites many reasons why adult women are motivated to return to school. Many women are forced to become more financially independent after a triggering event such as a separation, divorce, or the death of a partner. With today’s fluctuating economy and the downsizing of businesses and corporations, women often find themselves jobless and needing to support a family, often as a single parent. They are often faced with career limitations due to lack of education. White (2001) affirmed that many women consider and pursue part-time education because of “family obligations, the need to work for economic security and child care concerns” (p.1).

What is/was your rationale for pursuing DE? Was there a triggering event?

Women are faced with a plethora of barriers and stressors when they finally make the decision to embark on higher education through DE. Multiple stressors affect the student’s overall health and well-being, academic performance and can lead to attrition and subsequent non-completion of studies. The DE literature consistently indicates that non-completion and drop-out rates for DE students are higher than those for traditional classroom-based students. This is partly due to the barriers and stressors they face. In order to address the issues that women in DE must contend with the woman should be considered in context as a developing and evolving being. Through listening, hearing, and striving to understand her unique experience she will be empowered to be successful.

Having said this, there are two distinct theoretical models that interweave and work together to inform this guidebook. They are Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Bioecological Model and Cross’s (1981) Chain of Response (COR) Model. Cross’s model is useful in examining the process that a female DE student goes through when considering participation in adult learning. Bronfenbrenner’s model is useful as it considers the individual in context in describing how the various levels of environment affects an individual as she works through the process and vice versa.

To begin with, Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) model is multidimensional and recognizes all domains of development in an individual’s life, from the cognitive to the social. Proximal processes involve an individual’s "immediate interactions with people, or with the physical environment and with informational sources (such as books or movies)" (Broderick & Blewitt, 2003, p. 16). Proximal processes are interactive and are influenced by distal processes. Distal processes can occur within individuals (e.g., genetic make-up, disposition) or outside their immediate environment (e.g., educational system, societal influences). The various levels of environment that influence the development of an individual are the microsystem (immediate environment), mesosystem (relations among
the microsystems), *exosystem* (outside the immediate environment) and the *macrosystem*, which involves the attitudes and ideologies of the larger culture (Broderick & Blewitt). This model helps to put the student into perspective and understand how various levels of her environment influence her as an individual and a student. Undoubtedly, she will influence her environment (family, friends, employer) with her decisions as a student and her environment will influence her. This guidebook aims to understand the challenges she will face in her environment and help make the environment more conducive to success.

**Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Model**

Cross's (1981) COR model steps in to inform the guidebook by providing an understanding of an individual’s decision to participate in adult learning activities. This interactionist model assumes that an individual's participation in learning activities results from a chain of responses. Each response is determined based on a self-evaluation of where the individual is at in her environment. Although factors involved in determining whether an individual will participate in adult learning generally begins with the individual and gradually moves toward external environmental conditions, similar to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model, the interactions that take place in this model are also bidirectional. Personality, beliefs, attitudes and experience are major factors in the student’s decision of her readiness and motivation towards participation in adult learning. Other people’s responses towards her and her decision to participate are equally important. She must feel that she is valued and supported in her decision to participate.

As well, Cross (1981) indicated that the chain of response involves Points A to G and begins once the individual has evaluated her potential for participation in learning (Point A). Point B involves the individual's (and others') past experience/s and subsequent attitudes towards education. If an individual's past educational experiences have been positive she is more likely to participate. If they have not been positive, she is less motivated to participate. Points A and B are linked, suggesting "that there is a relatively stable and characteristic stance toward learning that makes some people eager to seek out new experiences with a potential for growth while others avoid challenges to their accustomed ways of thinking or behaving" (Cross, p. 126). Individuals who have had positive educational experiences establish a more positive self-evaluation, which in turn promotes more positive educational experiences. Having considered this information, the guidebook attempts to provide the female graduate DE student with “heads up”, realistic and relevant information about possible challenges/stressors she will face and strategies to head off these challenges before they lead to attrition then non-completion of courses/programs.

Point C in the model involves the importance of future goals to the individual and the expectation that participation in education will meet these goals. Life transitions, Point D, are the changes and developments in an individual's life that demand adjustment. Point E includes opportunities and barriers. Information, namely accurate information (Point F), is essential to the adult learner. Cross (1981) asserted that the role of information in the model is "critical in that it provides the information that links motivated learners to appropriate opportunities" (p. 127). Without the necessary information available, the adult learner may lose out on learning opportunities and fold in the face of barriers. Cross purported that there are forces for and against participation and quite often "most efforts to attract adults to learning activities start at Point E" (p. 129) in the model. Point C in the model was a valuable idea in developing the guidebook. Essentially the intent of the guidebook was to encourage the female DE student to believe that she can achieve success with future goals by providing strategies for success, success stories and examples of celebration. Point D was helpful in drawing the author’s attention to the changes that the DE student will experience in each level of environment and how she can best make adjustments to them and vice versa. Barriers as well as opportunities for success are a significant aspect of this final project and were examined at length in the guidebook.
Point F indicated that accurate information is essential for the DE student. Point G is the decision to participate in adult learning.

K. Patricia Cross’s Chain of Response Model

Life Transitions (D) \[\downarrow\]
Self-evaluation (A) \[\downarrow\]
Importance of goals and expectations that participation will meet goals (C) \[\downarrow\]
Opportunities and Barriers (E) \[\downarrow\]
Participation (G)


Furthermore, Cross's (1981) research in the area of barriers to participation in adult learning indicated that there are three distinct types of barriers that learners face: dispositional, situational, and institutional. Dispositional barriers are related to the attitudes and self-perceptions adults have about themselves as learners. Situational barriers include personal factors such as home and workplace responsibilities that work against the adult student's participation in learning. Institutional barriers are related to difficulties learners have accessing necessary services (e.g., counselling and financial support, library) or resources. One component missing from Cross's model are sociocultural barriers. It is essential to consider this aspect of a woman's experience, as societal/cultural views and expectations of what "a good woman" should be can be distorted and unrealistic. Each of these types of barriers is examined at length in this guidebook in the section entitled Issues Women Experience in Distance Education.

Any combination of dispositional, situational, institutional, and sociocultural barriers in the student's life can combine to make the prospect of enrolling or succeeding through DE courses/programs problematic. It is essential to look at women's developmental as well as educational needs and provide them with guidance and enablers towards education, as education has the potential to "empower women to break through the confines of the prescribed domestic roles: on the formal level, education leads to qualifications which may be used toward gaining economic and social equality" (von Prummer, 2000, p. 70).
Granted, this is not to say that men do not experience barriers or stressors when they embark on studies through DE. It is certain that they experience dispositional, situational, institutional, and sociocultural barriers as well. It is not the intention of this writer to minimize the challenges men face, however this guidebook is unique to women and the specific challenges that women face. It is meant for female graduate DE students because that is the area I am familiar with.

What I intend to do in this guidebook is:

1. To provide general knowledge in the area of DE.
2. To identify the numerous barriers and challenges that women face when pursuing graduate education through DE.
3. To provide strategies for women to manage childbearing and childrearing with DE educational goals.
4. To examine and report the perceptions of female DE learners and learn from their unique experiences.
5. To enhance the learning experience and quality of life of female graduate distance learners by providing support and normalization of the experience for female DE students.
6. To provide encouragement, hope, and instil a firm belief that, with motivation and perseverance, accomplishing career goals is not only a distinct possibility, but a probability.

The ideas I put forth come from a wealth of information available in the literature area of DE, from informal discussions I have had with other graduate students, from the courses I have taken in the Campus Alberta Applied Psychology (CAAP) Program, and from my own personal experiences of 15+ years of DE.

Author's Personal Journey

My experience with DE has been enriching, positive, and rewarding. My 15-year journey began in 1989 when I completed my Rehabilitation Practitioner (RP) Certificate program at a local community college and went to work as a childcare counsellor at a Government of Alberta Family and Children's Services Youth Assessment Center. During the RP program, I took an Abnormal Psychology DE course. I thoroughly enjoyed the course and began looking into enrolling in other psychology courses, with the prospect of earning a psychology degree.

The only way I could afford further education was to work full-time. I applied to Athabasca University and was accepted into their Bachelor of Arts, Psychology Concentration degree program. The first two courses I completed were PSYCH 289 Psychology as a Natural Science and PSYCH 290 General Psychology. The third course I completed truly impacted me. PSYCH 343 Issues and Strategies in Counselling Girls and Women convinced me that counselling and psychology were areas for which I had a passion. I was able to take the theoretical information I gained and put it to practical use in my work counselling at-risk adolescents. I recall the feelings of self-fulfillment, self-
gratification, and self-esteem that came from working through each of those courses and the ones that followed. I was hooked on DE.

I have been very fortunate to be able to incorporate DE into my everyday life and to have made it part of our family's lifestyle. I have had four children. My eldest daughter was born in 1991, my second eldest daughter was born in 1993, and my son was born in 2000. My third daughter was born in December, 1998 and passed away in April 1999 at 3½ months old. She was full-term and born with congenital abnormalities. She spent 3½ months in the hospital, 2½ hours away from our home and in her short time with us endured five major surgeries.

During the time I spent at my daughter's bedside in the neonatal unit (12 to 14 hours daily) I escaped by reading classic 19th and 20th century English novels for ENG 381 and ENG 397 respectively. When I was not doing what I could do to comfort my baby and help the nurses with her, I was taken back in history by memorable novels such as *Pride and Prejudice* (1812), *Wuthering Heights* (1847), *Vanity Fair* (1847-48), and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891). When my daughter died after her third heart operation my family was devastated. I was able to get an extension and continue my work on the courses when I returned home. This extension provided me with the time I needed to grieve and a sense of continuity in my life.

I completed my Bachelor of Arts, Psychology Concentration, over a 10-year period that included three maternity leaves. My husband and I discussed the pros and cons at length and I came to the conclusion that, with the momentum I possessed, I would venture forward into graduate studies. My goal was to complete my graduate studies and work towards becoming a chartered psychologist. The CAAP program is a new program and its Counselling Psychology route is what I need to become chartered. I was accepted into the Post-Graduate Certificate in Counselling Psychology program in the program's second year of operation and I eventually laddered into the Masters in Counselling Psychology. I have completed the coursework toward the degree. This final project is my last step towards this degree.

Over the years I have weaved my studies throughout my family life. I have taken coursework camping and read by the campfire. I have taken it with me on occasional holidays (e.g., Las Vegas) and read in hotel rooms while my children had afternoon naps or went to sleep for the night. I have taken the course assignment schedules with me on planes when I knew I would have time to sit quietly, reflect and brainstorm as to what type of paper or assignment I might want to do. I have taken coursework to soccer practices, piano practices, and swimming lessons. As well, I have taken my readings, borrowed laptops, and coursework to Summer Institute and on Weekend Practicum Seminars. I have utilized hotel computers to answer weekly Discussion Forum questions and to complete and send off research papers. I have spent many night shifts (over a four-year period) at my workplace completing assignments and papers while my co-workers watched movies or completed studies of their own.

Certainly, there were barriers/challenges over the years. Many times, I have sat at my computer in the cool, dark basement of my house on a warm summer day and watched as
my family drove off on our all-terrain vehicles for a day of pleasure and play at the lake, unable to go along because I had a research paper due at midnight. Those were emotional times. I would experience a sinking, heavy, guilty feeling that would not go away for hours. I was guilty for not working as hard as I could to get the paper done ahead of time; guilty that I chose to work on schoolwork instead of going with my family; guilty that my children were, once again, having a fun family time without me.

I have had many talks with my daughters about the sacrifices we must make in our lives. I have often expressed to them that our combined efforts and sacrifices will now benefit all of us in the long run. I have had to keep reminding myself of this over the years, as I often felt guilt over putting my studies before my children.

Over the years I have encountered many individuals who have gone the traditional university route in obtaining their academic credentials and they have been quite blatant about their views regarding DE. One co-worker made a comment that will always stay with me. He described DE degrees as "Mickey Mouse degrees." The credibility of DE has come into question many times over the years and I have found myself defending DE and my academic credentials. Others have been curious and questioned around how much time I actually spent learning at an institution, inferring that one needs to be at the institution in order for the degree to be taken seriously. If I would have come across the following quote earlier in my DE journey I would have made up a card, laminated it, put it in my wallet, then pulled it out for those questioning individuals. "Common sense dictates that we don't want to have surgeons and jet mechanics getting an education via distance learning…but for eight out of ten fields, students don't need to sit in a classroom" (Thomas, 2005, p. 3).

Another challenge for me was my shy personality. My undergraduate degree through DE did not prepare me with the necessary critical thinking skills. I had difficulties reflecting on my own values and beliefs (because, until that point, I had not given them that much thought), synthesizing information, critically analyzing that information, and then communicating the information to other students at the graduate level. I had difficulty formulating and expressing my own opinions. I was very self-conscious and unsure of myself. Given the expectations and flexibility of the CAAP program I was able to work at my own pace and be sure of my opinion before responding to weekly Discussion Forum questions. I found the instructor's and student's responses always supportive and encouraging and this eventually brought me out of my shell. Thought-provoking questions and responses from instructors and fellow students were also quite engaging, especially those that asked for reflection on the part of the student.

As I completed each course I would reward myself with a movie I had been wanting to see, a haircut and style, a major cleanup of my study area, or a BBQ steak and beer. Between courses I would read a novel for the fun of it. I would also reward my family with a special dinner, such as Chinese food take-out, family hors d'oeuvres and movie night, or an occasional gift of appreciation for being supportive and encouraging.

There are so many days I remember asking myself "What is keeping you motivated?" "Where are you getting your strength, resilience, and perseverance from?" It remains a mystery to me. In many ways, DE has been a savior. It has broadened my
intellectual horizons and provided me with confidence to pursue my career aspirations and so much more.

Over the years, many women have approached me and inquired about my experiences in and knowledge of DE. My responses have always been genuine interest and enthusiasm. I have spent many hours extolling the benefits of DE. If I can bestow knowledge through the following literature review, bring hope and provide encouragement and inspiration through the culminating guidebook to at least one woman hoping to enrol in or currently enrolled in a graduate DE program, then I will have achieved my goal.

**Brief Overview of the History of Distance Education**

DE has been in existence for over 100 years. In the mid-nineteenth century, once the postal system was established and more people learned to read and write correspondence courses, teaching a variety of different subjects such as languages and vocational training, became available. In Canada, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) delivered courses to isolated areas where the postal service did not go (Srivastava, 2002). Canadian pioneers and prairie homesteaders relied on correspondence to teach their large numbers of children. The eldest daughters of each family were encouraged to be highly literate so they could eventually teach their own children (Faith, 1988). During this time many individuals who lived at a distance from large educational institutions could not afford to live on campus and thus utilized DE. Back then in history DE was thought to be inferior to traditional classroom-based education and was frowned upon by the elite. Partly due to the establishment of large, world-renowned, influential institutions like the Open University United Kingdom (OU UK), which was founded in 1971, DE has seen an elevation in status.

Since the beginning of the 20th century communication technologies in DE have evolved at a rapid pace. From the establishment of radio (1920s) came television (1930s) and then newer television delivery technologies such as cable, satellite communications and fibre optics. In the last three decades these newer technologies have dominated the world of DE. As well, since the 1990s digital technologies via the Internet and other computer networks have greatly influenced the delivery of DE by making it more accessible to individuals throughout the world.

Undoubtedly, there are many factors that have influenced the growth of DE. Kramarae (2001) identified the following global influences:

- decreases in government subsidies, of the public institutions of higher education;
- increases in costs of higher education at both public and private institutions,
- increases in the number of employed women,
- reductions in secure long-term jobs,
- increases in credential requirements for entry to and continuing work in many jobs,
- rapid changes in information technologies,
- increases in online business,
- increases in venture capital funding in knowledge enterprises,
- increases in college enrolments,
- increases in attention to lifelong education,
- increases in competition among institutions for education dollars,
- increases in the globalization of competitiveness and commerce,
- shifts to the use of web-based training for workers, and
- Shifts by the U.S. Army to distance learning via laptop computers. (p. 4)

Although there are still a few sceptics that see DE as a lesser form of education than traditional classroom-based education, DE seems to gain popularity every day because of the aforementioned influences and due to the fact that it is a flexible, accessible, and viable opportunity for gaining personal knowledge as well as academic credentials. For information in the area of DE vs. Traditional classroom-based education see http://www.nosignificancedifference.org/.

What is Distance Education?

DE is a flexible, accessible, and feasible alternative to traditional classroom-based learning. Distance learning is used in many areas of education including primary school to high school, post-secondary/higher education, home schooling, the military, government training, and telemedicine.

The vast amount of DE literature provided many terms to describe DE including the popular e-learning, online learning, independent learning, and non-traditional study and, to be sure, there are just as many definitions used to identify DE. One fairly comprehensive description is offered by Rezabek (1999):

The transportation of information and the involvement of a learner in the acquisition of knowledge and understanding of an area of study through planned, usually structured, and organized (but also incidental) communication, that also uses supplemental resources and media-assisted two-way communication, where the learner and instructor are separated by distance and/or time. (p. 12)

There are various types of DE providers that exist around the world. Several are described by Stevenson (2000) including ivy-league bastions like Harvard and Yale; mom-and-pop startup operations; fraudulent diploma mills; major book publishers; booksellers like fatbrain.com; community and junior colleges; training organizations specializing in job skills training; technical schools; and professional organizations offering certificates that can lead to licensing (p. 12).

As noted above, there are many unscrupulous DE providers or “diploma mills” that individuals considering DE must be aware of and avoid. These are illegitimate for-profit businesses set up to essentially sell degrees, thus rendering them useless as far as credentials. It is essential that DE students do some research into their prospective DE provider so that they can distinguish the good programs from the bad. Legitimate organizations will have documented the fact that they have met all the necessary standards of reputable accrediting agencies.
DE and technology go hand in hand. In brief, there are various forms of distance learning. Three of the more popular ones include broadcast television, two-way videoconferencing, and the Asynchronous Learning Network (ALN). Broadcast television involves an instructor delivering a lecture via video technology synchronously into one or many students' homes. Although direct communication with the instructor is not possible during the lecture, students can contact their instructor at a later date via telephone, mail, or e-mail. Two-way videoconferencing is a form of DE that involves an instructor delivering lessons at a college campus and, as these lessons are being videotaped, they are viewed at a local school. Two-way videoconferencing allows for immediate communication between instructors and students using video technology. ALN involves the use of computer technology whereby the instructor uses the World Wide Web and group e-mail software to deliver lessons. Interaction between instructor and student is asynchronous which means they do not occur at the same time (Picciano, 2001).

Computer Mediated Communications (CMC) is a popular term found in the DE literature and involves communication between two or more people whereby digital hardware is used as a medium. CMC often employs e-mail, discussion forums, chat rooms, and bulletin board systems. Without a doubt, technology is ever-evolving and newer, more dynamic and interactive technologies are being developed daily, which inevitably influences the world of DE.

In DE, the roles and expectations of instructors and students are quite different from traditional classroom-based roles and expectations. The DE instructor's role consists of disseminating information, facilitating discussion amongst students, coaching, and evaluating students throughout their studies rather than face-to-face lecturing. DE instructors often decide on class content and design the materials that will be used in the online courses they teach. In contrast, the role of the DE student is a more active than passive approach to learning. DE students need to be organized, self-reliant, and motivated, and according to Stevenson (2000) self-directed learners are the most likely to excel in DE.

Although various DE programs have differing expectations, as far as the estimated amount of time needed to complete courses, this will also depend on personal and professional commitments or obligations, assignments due, how much of the lesson the DE student is already familiar with, and the student's motivation level. Further, many DE programs require mandatory attendance at some time during the program. For example, the CAAP: Counselling Initiative requires that their graduate students participate in a 3 week Summer Institute as well as two weekend seminars throughout their 2 to 3 year program. These are opportune times to meet and interact with fellow students and program instructors.

On the whole, DE is an effective means of providing educational opportunities to those who are unable to attend traditional classroom-based instruction because of work or family commitments, because they are geographically removed from access to an institution, or because of disabilities. Meyer-Peyton (2000) concluded that "while not pretending to replace traditional education, distributed learning programs offer another
dimension of opportunity to students who are better served by flexible schedules and workplaces" (p. 90).

Trends in Distance Education

There are many trends affecting the need for DE. Certainly, the process of globalization influences economic, social, and cultural trends that inevitably affect the area of DE.

One major trend indicated in the DE literature is that workplaces are demanding more from their employees. Expectations in the area of education and credentials are increasing as is the demand for individuals with a well-rounded variety of job skills. In addition, the workforce is changing and increases in temporary and part-time employment and multiple changes in career direction are a reality. Adult learners must be committed to lifelong learning, and maintaining and updating job skills in order to meet employer expectations (Belanger & Tuijnman, 1997). These changes have contributed to the growing popularity of and necessity for DE. As well, DE students are being looked at as consumers of education. They are shopping around for the course or program that best meets their personal and professional needs. They are in large part wanting or needing to work as they attain their credentials.

Educational facilities, all over the world, are facing capacity constraints due to the growing population of college-age students, enrollments, and adults pursuing higher education. The impossibility of the higher education infrastructure to develop and expand facilities in order to keep up with the growing population of students will lead to the need for alternatives and more DE programs (Howell, Williams, and Lindsay, 2005).

Higher learning traditional institutions, that have historically been publicly funded or non-profit, are finding the need to expand their programs to offer DE in order to generate profits. The development of alliances between educational institutions in order to share technology and resources is becoming increasingly popular. A good example of this is the CAAP: Counselling Initiative program, which is an initiative between Athabasca University, the University of Calgary, and the University of Lethbridge. This innovative program was introduced in 2002 and is the first DE graduate counsellor program of its kind in Canada. Although, Howell, Williams, and Lindsay (2005) described the distinct possibility that these types of development in DE "may magnify competition among educational providers and allow new models and leaders to emerge" (p. 7) the institutions involved in the CAAP program work well together sharing equally the various components of program development, implementation and administration.

To conclude, technology is evolving at a rapid pace. Since the emergence of the Information Age (1950s) computers have permeated every aspect of our lives. They exist everywhere in society, the workplace, and at home. Adults and children from all nationalities and socio-economic levels are becoming more familiar and comfortable with computers. People are accessing the Internet and e-mail and statistics reveal that over the last few years there has been a tremendous increase in the use of the Internet. One trend described by Picciano (2001) is that "the convergence of computer, communications, and
audio/video technologies resulting in inexpensive, portable information devices will have a major impact on all aspects of information-related activities, including education" (p. 194). Implications for DE include more accessible and affordable access.

Who Are the Users of Distance Education?

Most studies of distance learners in North America have indicated that more women than men are enrolled in courses through DE and these numbers are continually increasing. Throughout the DE literature the majority of DE users are identified as female, older than the typical undergraduate (between 25 & 35 years old), employed full-time, and married.

At Athabasca University (AU), Canada's Open University, situated in Athabasca, Alberta, the number of female graduates has increased from 38 percent in 1998-99 to 54 percent in 2002-03 (Athabasca University, 2003, p. 12). AU currently has 26,933 undergraduate and 2609 graduate students enrolled in DE courses (Athabasca University, 2004a). The CAAP program enrollment statistics are considered separate from the above statistics. This special initiative/partnership currently has approximately 220 graduate students and the majority of these students are female (83%) and 28 to 60 years old (Collins & Jerry, 2005).

Enrollment statistics for the OU UK indicate that it serves 125,000 registered students. An equal number of individuals buy self-contained study packages one course at a time. At any given time the OU has 200,000 registered students. Of the OU UK students almost half are women. The majority of these DE students are in their late twenties to their forties and ¾ of these female DE students work part or full-time during their studies (Lunneborg, 1994)

There are various types of users of DE identified in the literature. They are: shiftworkers such as nurses; women in the childrearing phase; individuals who are basically excluded from all levels of traditional education because of class, race, gender or age; and individuals who lack mobility due to physical disability. Others include workers seeking skill updating, retraining or professional recertification; military personnel; and prisoners.

There are many other individuals who cannot attend traditional classroom-based instruction at higher education institutions due to geographical isolation. These people are far removed from large urban centres and live and work in small country towns on farms and in factories (e.g., New South Wales; India-remote northern mountain provinces; Alaska; Canada – rural areas in the prairies and up north). Picciano (2001) further identified fisherman in Iceland who spend weeks at sea and inhabitants of hundreds of islands that make up the country of Indonesia.

Moisey (2003) described a “groundbreaking initiative” developed to provide a combination of DE communication and information technologies via a user-friendly website to adults with developmental disabilities and their families/guardians in Northeastern Alberta. The NorthEast Community Online website (http://www.ne-
community.com) was introduced in November, 2001, and provides information in the area of housing, employment, leisure, support services, and education (life skills, basic literacy, higher education). This resource empowers individuals with developmental disabilities and their families/guardians and allows for “the ability...to be well informed, to make their needs and views known, and to participate in community-based policy and decision-making” (Moisey, 2005, p. 3). As well, this virtual community enhances quality of life by providing a supportive and encouraging online meeting place. Moisey (2003) indicated that this website has been accessed worldwide from the U.S., Europe, Australia and New Zealand, Africa, Oceania, the Middle East, and Asia.

DE provides hope to individuals with disabilities who would like to pursue higher education but are somewhat limited by their disabilities. Stevenson (2000) stated that "evolving accessibility standards and technology (in DE) can help people with visual impairments, color blindness, hearing and speech impairments, cognitive and language impairments (such as dyslexia), mobility impairments (such as hand and limb injuries, or arthritis) and seizure disorders" (p. 92).

To conclude, since the establishment of open and distance universities, women have been seen as "forming one of their primary constituencies" (von Prummer, 2000, p. 1). Quite often these women had restricted access to traditional education because they were responsible for sick or elderly relatives. "The original target groups of distance education efforts were adults with occupational, social, and family commitments. This remains the primary target group today" (Schlosser & Anderson, 1994, p. 4).

Why Do Women Choose Distance Education?

Women learners choose DE for a variety of reasons. DE provides the opportunity for independent study with freedom in relation to time and place of study for those unable to attend traditional classroom-based instruction. Statistics reveal that the majority of distance learners in North America are women who are often managing multiple life roles. Many women are attracted to the flexibility and accessibility of DE and its potential for attainment alongside childrearing. For women who have committed to raising their children at home, pursuing education by DE is seen as ideal. Having said this, there have been several pertinent studies conducted in the area of students, women in particular, and their motivations for pursuing DE. Some of the results area as follows.

Rezabek's (1999) study described college students' rationale or motivation for pursuing and participating in DE via various methods (e.g., interactive television courses, guided self-study courses). Of the 23 students interviewed, 20 were female and ranged in age from 19 to 50 years old. Motives of these students included:

- desire for a better life than their current circumstances;
- sense of dissatisfaction with the jobs these individuals have or have had;
- desire for a better or more enjoyable job, better pay, better benefits, and opportunities for advancement;
- desire to increase self-esteem and self-confidence;
- desire to gain respect from others;
• desire to achieve and accomplish "something," such as obtaining a degree, a new career, learning, or specific domain knowledge;
• a combination of getting a degree, a new job, and learning or knowledge.

Several of these students were uncertain as to what they hoped to achieve other than to earn a degree, and there were those who were motivated to participate in DE because of a triggering event such as divorce, the death of someone, an argument or fight, or a dare or challenge. Triggering events such as these were quite commonly documented in the DE literature. Rezabek (1999) maintained that "the motives, goals, and life experiences that act as precursors to a student's decision to enrol may be numerous and complex" (p. 98).

Furst-Bowe and Dittman (2001) found that intellectual satisfaction, personal fulfillment, and being a role model for family members were reasons some individuals chose for utilizing DE. Some students valued the privacy of studying at home and working alone (Leiper, 1993; Kramarae, 2001), and others gaining cultural knowledge.

Further, in Kramarae's (2001) study of women in DE she found they preferred independent to collaborative study because they understood themselves best in terms of how they learn and felt they could rely on themselves more than on other classmates. They also expressed feeling more self-assured when working independently than through group work. The more mature women in Kramarae's study expressed being more comfortable with online learning than with on-campus learning due to their age and comfort level around the typical university student. They felt they were better able to communicate and relate to students closer to their own age. Many of these women preferred to spend their free time with their families rather than in social activity. Many participants in the study found comfort in the fact that negative assumptions and biases based on appearance including age, skin, color, gender, hair styles, clothing, speech, and physical disabilities are missing in online communication discussions and, because students and teachers cannot see each other, there is virtually no opportunity for racism, sexism, or homophobia.

The results of Runte’s (1981) study indicated that accessibility was a major factor for students pursuing DE. In his thesis undertaken to describe The Emergence of the Open University Concept in Alberta, Runte established that DE students find AU, to be accessible in a number of ways. Tuition was considered to be affordable by most individuals with the exception of the least well-off. DE students can pay for courses as they go, as opposed to yearly or per semester as at a traditional university. They can continue to work full-time while earning a post-secondary degree, which helps reduce the financial burden. DE students can study at home rather than attend on-campus university classes. The ability to study at home eliminates the geographical barriers that tend to isolate students from educational institutions. Although courses have a specific time limit that students must follow, DE students can take courses and study when it suits their personal and work schedules. They can apply for extensions in courses or delay their studies if necessary. DE students described the open admissions policy of AU as appealing. For students who do not qualify for entrance at other universities or do not want to follow the set programs of other institutions, but would like some form of tertiary education, the Open University concept is advantageous.
Flexibility is another major determinant for individuals considering or actively pursuing DE. Race (1998) found that DE allows for a high degree of flexibility for individuals pursuing education for professional purposes or as part of their leisure pursuits. Various types of flexibility that appeal to DE learners are **Flexibility of start and end date**. This allows for freedom to incorporate DE into a busy home life or work schedule when the time is right for the student. **Flexibility in entry levels** allows learners to analyze course prerequisites, assess prior learning, knowledge, and skills and then determine if and how they will work through their coursework. **Flexibility of choice in how much support student will access** allows learners to determine if, when, or how much they will utilize tutor support. **Flexibility in regards to student motivation levels** allows the student to determine how much energy they will put into various aspects of their DE course or program. **Flexibility in pace** allows DE learners to set their own pace dependent on life and work circumstances. **Flexibility of location** allows the student to decide where they will participate in the various course activities. **Flexibility in choice of learning environment** allows students choices in determining the type of atmosphere that is most preferable, comfortable, or conducive to their learning. **Flexibility in determining to what extent information technology will play in their studies**. Various options are available to DE students who are resistant to utilizing technology in their studies (e.g., home study-correspondence). **Flexibility for learners to work collaboratively or on an individual basis** allows students to determine if and how much time they will spend communicating or interacting with their classmates.

In describing DE through the OU UK, Lunneborg (1994) purport that "traditional universities ask mature women to fit with them. The OU says, instead, I will fit with you" (p. 103). For example, Gertrude Mtandabari had an ear operation in 1982, leaving her deaf in one ear and consequently interfering with her nursing career. Gertrude needed a way to study that allowed her to work and be at home with her two sons, took her disability into account, and enabled her to circumvent the challenge that English as a second language presented her. OU provided her with opportunities not available at a traditional university (Lunneborg, 1994).

Lastly, Rezabek (1999) maintained that "students' motives for enrolling and other factors in their decision may have a significant impact on their ultimate success, their satisfaction, as well as ability to persist with the distance learning experience" (p. 27). What reasons can you identify that motivate you and which of these motivators do you relate to?

**Issues Women Experience in Distance Education**

As indicated at the beginning of this guidebook, non-completion and drop-out rates for DE students are higher than for traditional classroom-based students. This is partly due to the barriers and stressors DE students face. These inhibitors place undue pressure on the student, causing attrition, and non-completion of courses and programs. Three types of barriers consistently identified in the adult education literature are Cross's (1981) dispositional, situational, and institutional barriers to participation in adult education. Missing from Cross’s study are sociocultural barriers which have significant impact on an
individual’s decision to participate in higher education. Each of these categories of barriers will be addressed in this section.

**Dispositional Barriers.** Dispositional barriers include learner's ideas about themselves and their abilities. In a 1974 study, Carp, Peterson, and Roelfs found that potential learners failed to participate in learning activities because of the following dispositional barriers.

- Afraid that I'm too old to begin.
- Low grades in past, not confident of my ability.
- Not enough energy and stamina.
- Don't enjoy studying.
- Tired of school, tired of classrooms.
- Don't know what to learn or what it would lead to.
- Hesitate to seem too ambitious. (p. 46)

Although these barriers were recognized more than 30 years ago they are still applicable to adult learner participation today.

A significant dispositional barrier noted in the DE literature is the lack of self-confidence. This is especially true of older women re-entering education. They have many doubts about how well they will be able to manage the learning process, including studying and retaining knowledge. They often experience fear and anxiety at the thought of competing with younger students and have many reservations about utilizing technologies that are new and unfamiliar to them. Poor health and lack of motivation are additional barriers. Ellen Davies, a previous student of the OU, pursued courses for the first time in 1980 when she was 27 years old. She reported that when she decided to pursue DE: "My low expectations have always been an obstacle, but there are also the expectations of other people, or the lack of expectations. When I started doing the OU, a lot of people said, 'What are you doing that for? Who do you think you are?' A bit like you had delusions of grandeur, or you weren't satisfied with life as it was with them" (Lunneborg, 1994, p. 34). Ellen Davies’ negative evaluation of her potential to succeed in DE was a barrier she overcame in order to pursue and complete DE courses/programs. A further challenge she faced and surmounted was the perceived threat those around her felt with her decision to embark on higher education.

**Situational Barriers.** Situational barriers arise from an individual's life situation. Carp, Peterson, and Roelfs (1974) identified the following situational barriers in their research:

- cost, including tuition, books, child care, and so on;
- not enough time;
- home responsibilities;
- job responsibilities;
- no child care;
- no transportation;
- no place to study or practice; and
friends or family don't like the idea. (p. 46)

One of the most impactful situational barriers is the lack of emotional support students receive from family members. von Prummer (2000) has conducted substantial research in the area of women DE students and the challenges they face. Female DE students are often made to feel guilty and neglectful by their children and partner for pursuing their education, resulting in their placing higher expectations and demands on themselves in order to counteract this perceived selfishness. For some female DE students, gaining knowledge is seen as a threat to the balance of power in the home and as a threat to their husbands, who would like them to remain "subservient and domesticated" (Morgan, as cited in von Prummer, 2000, p. 74).

Moreover, von Prummer (2002) reported that, when female DE students take courses, rather than having some of their "duties" relieved by family members, they often have increased demands placed on them. Male DE students on the other hand, indicated that they are often excused from household and childcare responsibilities and given a substantial amount of quiet time for studying. Male students also report being assisted by their partner with research or typing up of research papers/assignments. Women are often at a disadvantage, for they must carry the extra load of a degree course with their job as well as domestic duties and possibly childcare. Kramarae (2001) indicated that women feel it is primarily their responsibility to take care of the educational, emotional and medical needs of their children and partner. Men generally have limited responsibilities and do not have to carry the multiple loads of domestic labour and childcare alongside work and education. von Prummer's research indicated that "in cases where there is a partner, the domestic and parenting work is not shared equally, and the double or triple burden of family and paid work always is the woman's responsibility" (von Prummer, 2002, p. 57).

One major assumption regarding women and DE is that DE is particularly suited to housewives and stay-at-home mothers, as they have more disposable time on their hands and can easily plan their educational schedule around their everyday home life. It is assumed that many of the tasks involved in housework and childrearing are easily accomplished and take very little time, effort, or planning. von Prummer (2002) maintained that:

This view ignores the character of domestic labour and childcare, both of which are extremely fragmented and subject to external pressures. Specifically, it does not address the reality of those women who are mothers and have to be ready to react immediately to direct and indirect demands from their child or children. (p. 65)

Kramarae (2001) further asserted that women who study online have less time for themselves than traditional students do. She described a female DE student’s schedule in shifts. The individual’s first shift occurs outside the home at her place of employment, the second occurs as the primary caretaker of family members in the home, and the third shift (working on her education) happens whenever she can fit it into her busy schedule.
Women must overcome greater obstacles than men in order to earn academic credentials. They must deal with family dissonance, extreme and hectic workloads, and inner turmoil. "They have fewer resources but more responsibilities, less support from their family and more scruples about the legitimacy of getting an education for themselves" (von Prummer, 2000, p. 203). Considering the unrealistic expectations women place on themselves and those that are placed on them by others it is easy to see why attrition rates are as high as they are. With such pressure there is a real danger of the female DE student abandoning her studies before she has reached her educational goals.

A significant situational barrier recognized throughout the DE literature is the fact that female DE students often do not have a place they can call their own to study. There are few quiet areas in the home where they can go to read and concentrate on their studies. Constant interruptions make learning a challenge. Quite often DE students are using the family computer, which is situated in a heavy traffic area, and must schedule their study time around their family's computer usage. Those with workstations often have to contend with spilled drinks, sticky candy messes, and disruption of their educational materials. This can be discouraging and frustrating.

Access to computer technology can be another major challenge for female DE students. von Prummer (2000) indicated in her research that three factors influence a woman's access to technology.

- The first factor is economic, since women generally have less control over the family income and tend to be in lower-paying jobs.
- The second factor is based on gender effects in the education and socialization of girls and boys, resulting in women being less knowledgeable or less confident with respect to their own technical competence and therefore more willing to leave such expensive decisions to their male partner.
- The third factor is that men are more likely to use the computer more extensively and that it therefore seems justified that they should choose the kind of equipment purchased for use by themselves and their other family members. (p. 129)

von Prummer (2000) purported that women and men's views often differ in regards to technology and learning about technology. Men more often learn by doing and by reading the manual or handbook or by accessing online help, as opposed to women, who often feel they do not have the time or the desire and would prefer to seek help from other people. Further, female DE students are also less confident in their ability to use technology and consider themselves less competent than men do. Men often consider themselves as experts in the area of technology. The views women hold regarding their abilities in using technologies can serve to undermine their success in DE studies.

Finally, financing studies can prove to be a significant situational barrier for many women who are returning to higher education. These women have often devoted their time to raising their children and have decided to go back to school to gain an education, only to find there are limited financial options available to them. Women who have been employed and wish to pursue further education are often met with the reluctance of some
employers to provide them with feasible financial options such as paid education leave or part-time work. Sperling (1989) purported in the United Kingdom the student loan system is biased against women, giving priority to students who have been studying full-time for 3 consecutive years. Women interested in traditional women’s areas are given lower priority and most often need to use their welfare benefits and housekeeping monies to pay for their DE studies and childcare. Similarly, in Canada, lending institutions are reluctant to lend money to DE students unless they are working full-time. If a student is working, lending institutions are often reluctant to lend money because the student may be making enough money and appear able to pay for courses gradually; however, this can cause a financial burden.

Institutional Barriers. Institutional barriers include "practices and procedures that exclude or discourage working adults from participating in educational activities" (Cross, 1981, p. 98). Carp, Peterson, and Roelfs (1974) identified several institutional barriers in their study, including:

- Don't want to go to school full time.
- Amount of time required to complete program.
- Courses aren't scheduled when I can attend.
- No information about offerings.
- Strict attendance requirements.
- Courses I want don't seem to be available.
- Too much red tape in getting enrolled.
- Don't meet requirements to begin program.
- No way to get credit or a degree. (p. 46)

Other significant institutional barriers documented in the DE literature are program costs, lack of resource availability and technical assistance, lack of equipment and infrastructure, instructional concerns, physical access to library services, and scheduling or registration assistance. In many cases, the institution is too far away from the adult learner.

Sociocultural Barriers. One of the greatest challenges and primary sources of stress for women students all over the world (Canada, United States, Australia, Israel, Papua New Guinea, India) comes from the multiple and often conflicting roles they must play in their daily lives. Read, Elliott, Escobar and Slaney (1988) asserted that the various roles of mother, partner, and employee may be somewhat overwhelming at times and considering becoming a DE student (possibly out of necessity) may cause further distress and guilt.

To illustrate, in Israel, a young woman who marries a fellow student is expected to postpone her own tertiary studies and work full-time to support her husband's studies. Once he has completed his studies and begins working full-time he will support her while she pursues her education further. "In many cases, however, these plans are never carried out, and at the age of 30 the woman finds herself with a half-finished degree, a feeling of frustration and failure plus the responsibility for young children" (Enoch, 1988, p. 67). The individual must consider whether full-time study is an option, whether she can transfer credits already earned, the time commitment and effort to complete formal
education, and family acceptance of her decision to pursue further studies. These are difficult decisions to make and women feel much pressure to do what is right for their families.

A further sociocultural barrier is that education is viewed negatively in various cultures. In many cultures education is not seen as being important and a woman’s decision to pursue any education is frowned upon. For example, education for women in Papua New Guinea (PNG) is not typically seen as valuable, especially for those who live in rural areas. Mandie-Filer (1988) described that the cultural, social, and political systems of PNG expect that women will marry, have children, take on family and household duties. Education is considered a threat to the well-being of the family and family responsibilities by men and women of the culture. Attending traditional schooling away from home is perceived as wasteful and frowned upon. But as urbanization occurs the demand for educated workers increases and women are reconsidering their position in society.

Androcentrism, as a significant barrier, in DE is well documented. von Prummer (2000) insisted that:

The persisting androcentrism, which either ignores these (gender) differences or sets the male experience as the norm to which women have to adapt, limits the benefits which women can derive from the educational opportunities offered through open and distance learning. (p. 47)

Women are the primary users of DE, yet they are regularly discriminated against. They are seen by men, including university faculty members, as "unreliable and uncommitted students whose home responsibilities always take precedence over studying" (Edwards, as cited in Lunneborg, 1994, p. 101). Women's domestic responsibilities are often devalued and considered trivial because they are inherent in women's nature (Lunneborg, 1994).

There are very few women in positions of authority in the area of DE. Women are consistently underrepresented in the areas of administration, management, and academic staff (Kramarae, 2001; von Prummer, 2000). To a great extent, women are not involved in "producing technological solutions and designing technological delivery systems, software, and educational packages" (Kramarae, 2001, p. 5) and a great majority of teaching materials are written by men from a male perspective (von Prummer, 2000). von Prummer (2000) maintained that "gender awareness is the criterion by which a 'good' distance education system needs to be judged. If gender is not seen as relevant, the system will not be equally accessible to women and men and will offer men more chances to succeed" (von Prummer, 2000, p. 42).

Summary. Female DE students are destined to come up against many challenges or barriers as they proceed into the world of DE. Their families may disagree with their decision to pursue higher education. They may encounter self-defeating thoughts about their own abilities. They may be confronted with unrealistic societal or cultural views and expectations of women and discrimination that can be debilitating and cause attrition.
Many of these challenges will either deter potential students from enrolling or participating in DE or make them more resilient and determined to pursue tertiary studies and succeed. "A wide variety of evidence from different countries supports the conclusion that distance education, while involving a degree of risk – to the stability of families and relationships and to personal self-esteem, etc. – nevertheless offers opportunities to women which, on balance, are worth taking" (von Prummer, 2000, p. 1).

The following guidebook aims to identify and minimize barriers and stressors, and provide strategies for managing these challenges. Organizational skills, time management skills, communication strategies for dealing with children and partners and other various stress management tools, that have been found helpful in alleviating some of the pressures of graduate studies, are offered.
How to Make DE Work for You

Thus far I have introduced you to the models that inform this guidebook, and to my personal journey in DE. I have provided a general overview of the area of DE, which included identification of the numerous barriers and challenges that women face when pursuing higher education through DE. This is a practical component of the guidebook, aimed at helping you contend with some of the stressors you may face. I hope you will find it informative and useful to you in your DE journey toward success.

Gilbert (2001) identified successful students as actively involved in their learning, focused on their goals, able to prioritize their responsibilities, reaching out for the assistance they need, and paying at least some attention to their health and wellness. Kramarae (2001) added that:

The student most suited for distance learning has financial and emotional support from others at home; the desire for material relevant to the student's daily or future life; a willingness to embrace challenges; good communications skills; good typing skills; and enjoyment of written communications, perhaps even over the spoken word; a willingness to work harder than students taking courses in the classroom; a lack of access to traditional classroom courses; and physical disabilities that make classroom attendance difficult. (p. 21)

Inevitably, some female graduate DE students will face barriers in some of these areas. Therefore it is important to develop and utilize effective coping skills in any DE program. Maintaining balance and perspective throughout any course or program will help to gain resiliency. Kemp (2001) described resiliency as "the individual's ability to manage or cope with significant adversity or stress in ways that are not only effective, but may result in increased ability to respond to future adversity (p. 3).

“Where there is no struggle, there is no strength”
~Oprah Winfrey~

Strategies for Managing the Impact of Dispositional Barriers

Motivation. During the development of the guidebook I found the following fun and painless online quiz by Lambert (n.d.) to rate your level of discipline, motivation, and likelihood of success. Try this!

Motivation is crucial to the female graduate DE student's goals. Without motivation and desire you will not succeed in accomplishing what you set out to do. Pauline Swindells, an OU DE student, remarked that "the hardest was doing things when you don't feel like doing anything, when you're tired. You just haul your bum in here and say, Do it" (as cited in Lunneborg, 1994, p. 30). That sums it up for me. Over the years, when I felt that I could not possibly get off the couch to work on answering any more Discussion
Forum questions or on an assignment because I was too tired and worn down, I found the strength inside me to carry on through the use of self-talk, motivating rewards, and sometimes allowing myself to vegetate on the couch. You will find the strength too!

To begin with, the basics, such as proper nutrition and sleep habits as well as regular exercise, promote health and wellness. DE graduate students tend to do a lot of snacking and burning the candle at both ends. Eating smaller amounts of healthy food throughout the day will help you consume the necessary nutrients to provide you with energy you will need for studying. Limiting caffeinated and alcoholic beverages, and drinking at least five glasses of water each day can promote health. Too, sleep keeps an individual well rested and clearheaded and able to focus on schoolwork. Another important area is exercise which affects brain chemistry, which helps reduce stress, so exercising at least three times a week for 20 minutes each time can help to get those endorphins going. Feeling good physically can also help with motivation levels. What about a little Pilates? T’ai Chi? Volleyball? One of my classmates suggested taking vitamins to help decrease stress and stay healthy. She took vitamins C and B and calcium regularly to help her relax and sleep. You might find that being intentional about getting enough rest, exercise, and proper nutrition coupled with vitamin supplements can go a long way in furthering your success in DE. Canada’s Guide to Healthy Eating and Physical Activity, includes the Canada Food Guide and can be found on the Health Canada website at http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/guide/oyc-ovc_e.html

Spirituality is an area of importance for many individuals. Many individuals feel relaxed or energized when they attend their place of worship and listen to a sermon from their priest, minister, pastor, or other spiritual advisor. These experiences often identify challenges in life that individuals can relate to and provide meaningful and uplifting messages of hope and faith. Some women find meditation, yoga, and other forms of spiritual connection to be calming and grounding.

Motivation can be very difficult especially for female DE students who work part-time or full-time and have children and/or a partner. They may find they are constantly juggling study time, daily living activities, obligations, and commitments. There are a few suggestions that might help you stay motivated. One is doing schoolwork at the same time as your children are doing their homework (O’Leary-Rockey, 2004). Designating a specific time and place for all of you to do homework, such as each evening after supper at the dining room table, can promote discipline in yourself and your children. Some DE mothers find that their children motivate them and encourage them on a daily basis when doing schoolwork together. Spending time together studying can teach your children more effective study habits, organizational and time management skills, and that you greatly value education. Further, teaching your child about the process of research and how to use references, indexes, glossaries, as you accomplish your work, provides them with the tools they can utilize to become empowered in the study process. While you are working together you are open to their questions and you can open up the discussion to their opinions and thoughts about certain subjects and really listen to them. This could be a memorable experience; for you and your children in that you could learn from each other, enhance your interpersonal communication and Remember, you are setting a valuable example.
Further, many individuals notice they generally have high and low energy periods throughout the day. Being aware of when you feel best and taking advantage of that time to do schoolwork is beneficial. Setting aside those two or so hours a day will make it easier to follow a schedule and to stay motivated. Studying for small blocks (half an hour to one hour) at a time is generally more productive than studying for several hours at a time. Taking a small break to reward oneself (with an herbal tea, some stretches, or a short walk in the garden) for an hour's work can be motivating.

A small but effective strategy includes setting a goal and writing it down, once you sit down, for what you will accomplish during that study period. Just documenting the goal can place just enough pressure on you to complete it before you leave the study session.

Being able to study effectively involves being able to concentrate and comprehend what you are studying. The sense that you are learning and accomplishing things one day at a time can be motivating. Gilbert (2001) maintained that the most effective way to study and learn is to preview, view, and review. Previewing involves examining the entire course and planning ahead for future reports, papers, exams, and chatroom activities. Viewing involves actually doing the work in a timely manner. Reviewing ensures that you have all of the necessary materials and notes from your course. Picciano (2001) stressed that staying motivated and being able to integrate "distance learning activities such as studying with other daily activities, is an important determinant of success" (p. 94).

Environment: If possible, it is essential to have your own workspace. If you are studying at home, it is necessary to have enough space for the computer, fax machine, printer, and scanner and to lay out books, notebooks, paper, pencils, and assignments. Space that is free from intrusions and allows for peace and quiet is desirable. Stevenson (2000) described some solutions that might help:

- Find a niche under the stairs and install a small desk.
- Put a card table up at one end of the basement playroom and make that room off limits during study time.
- Purchase one of those desks-in-a-cabinet that allows you to close the doors when the desk is not in use and keeps clutter out of view.
- If you can't close the door on noise from elsewhere in the house, consider earplugs, or even a headset and small CD player to cover the noise with less distracting music. (Earplugs were a lifesaver for me!)
- If you must set up the computer in a living space that's not exclusively devoted to study, consider putting the computer on a cart with rollers (you can usually find them at reasonable prices at office supply stores) so that you can move the whole thing easily from the closet to the kitchen or whatever room you choose to study in) each day. You can store your books and papers inside the cart too. (p. 110)

What do you see when you look at your study area? Comfort is essential. Your program may be two, three, or more years long and it is important that you have the
appropriate equipment, including a comfortable computer chair. You will spend hours in this chair sitting in front of the computer, so it is worthwhile to invest in one you like. According to Stevenson (2000), back and neck strain from sitting for long hours and wrist and eyestrain from typing and reading from a computer screen are hazards of online learning. She suggests that DE learners learn the basic rules of ergonomics, which provide for more comfortable and efficient positioning of the body at a workstation. A great website for obtaining information on ergonomics is Office Ergonomics Training at http://office-ergocom/. This website provides information such as Fourteen Things You Should Know About Back Pain, A Dozen Things You Should Know About Eyestrain and the Pros and Cons of Ergonomic Office Equipment (wrist rests, task lighting, glare screens).

The study atmosphere should be conducive to studying. I cannot concentrate when my environment is cold. I need warmth in order to function. If you are working in a cool area such as a basement and have difficulties concentrating because you are cold, look at purchasing a small electric heater (for under $50) to put under your computer desk. These warm an area quite quickly. As well, proper lighting is also recommended for studying. For me, sitting in the sun or near a window with the sun shining on me is invigorating! In general ensure your study space is away from distraction, comfortable, and if possible, only used for study.

Communication. It is essential to have the support and cooperation of your family and friends when making the commitment to participate in DE. The time spent on schoolwork inevitably takes time away from loved ones and they might begin to resent it. Being clear on what everyone's expectations are will help make this experience more manageable. Stevenson (2000) suggests creating an agreement with family members such as the following.

- I need you to respect my privacy while I'm studying. I appreciate you keeping voices, the TV, and other noise to a minimum.
- If I'm in the middle of studying, please don't interrupt me unless it's an emergency. If it is something you consider important, I promise to stop working and respect you by giving you my undivided attention until the situation is resolved.
- Please don't move my papers and books around. I'll try to keep clutter to a minimum around my workspace if you promise not to reorganize my stuff.
- If you need to use the same computer I use for class, please don't delete files or install software without asking me first. I'll respect your work on the computer with the same courtesy.
- If I'm ignoring you or being rude to you because of my studies, be honest and tell me so. (p. 114)

Two basic principles identified in AU's Student Services Orientation Guidebook (1983) when communicating your needs and expectations are:
1. *Ask and it may be given (demand and it shall be denied or given grudgingly).*
   This principle affirms that you have the right to ask for what you want, such as
time to study or help with household or parenting duties. Consultation in an
assertive manner as opposed to demanding will get you everywhere!
2. *Give to get.* Negotiating for what one desires results in satisfaction being reached
on both sides of any situation. Listening and respecting the needs of others is the
key to promoting support from others.

Open communication between you, your friends, and family members is necessary.
Ensuring that they understand and accept your reasons for pursuing DE and the sacrifices
that must be made now by all parties for the benefit of all in the future is significant.
Working together on a set of statements toward an agreement with family/friends might
ensure that each individual’s interests will be kept in mind throughout the DE process.
This contract might address chores, study time, freetime, extracurricular activities, and
time spent together and apart. Kramarae (2001) found in her study on women in DE, that
"women who respond that they view education as something that advances their family's
well-being typically do not feel guilty about pursuing online classes. They reconcile time
away from the family by recognizing that further education may serve a family's long-
term interests" (p. 35).

“Optimism is the faith that leads to achievement. Nothing can be done without hope or
confidence”
~Helen Keller~

Moreover, changes in and growth of each family member is inevitable as time goes
on and as the DE learner follows through on her studies. Awareness of and
acknowledgement of these changes is significant. It is easy to get caught up in all of the
assignments and papers due, the plans that need to be made for mandatory attendance
during the program, work projects, laundry, window cleaning, and so on. Time goes by,
and you may realize that it has been a week since you have a heart to heart talk with your
teenage daughter. Dedicating undivided attention to each of your children and partner each
day will help you stay connected with them and open to their concerns or needs. As often
as possible I read to my son before bed and lay with each of my daughters for 10 to 15
minutes before bed. I generally ask my children about the best thing that happened to them
that day and the worst thing that had happened that day. This has opened the lines of
communication many times and often I would hear about difficulties with teachers,
upcoming birthday parties, relationship problems, beauty products I needed to pick up
from the drug store, and so on. Quite often my children have surprised me and asked me
what I am working on in my studies. Allowing for the involvement of family members in
your studies will promote cohesiveness and encourage support (Stevenson, 2000).

*Technology.* Technological support is the story of my life! Thank goodness for my
husband and the technical support I have received from him and his friends and co-
workers over the last few years. Gilbert (2001) indicated that:
Research shows that student attitudes toward technology often improve as familiarity with the technology increases. That is, students new to a particular technology may initially exhibit some concern – usually that means a reluctance to actively participate in the distance classroom. But many studies show that familiarity with technology erodes anxiety and improves participation over time – especially when teachers get involved with help and support. (p. 174)

I was quite apprehensive regarding DE technology to begin with, but as I familiarized myself with my computer and the DE program website they became second nature. The DE websites are generally easy to navigate and provide students with necessary information. The links provide course and program information such as admission and registration information, registration fees, student services, course materials, timetables, library services, and contact names and numbers. At the onset of the program and several times throughout the program, for a few hours for each course it is important to explore, examine, and re-examine the website. Get to know where the student coffee rooms are so you can make some contact with other DE students.

Self-Talk. Much time is spent each day on internal monologues. The things we say to ourselves influence our feelings and behaviour. If our thoughts and self-talk are negative, we will and up feeling stressed, doubtful about our abilities, or depressed. Negative thoughts are anxiety provoking, destructive and can lead to self-doubt, lower levels of motivation, and ultimate failure in courses and programs. In order to change negative self-talk to positive self-talk, you must be aware of when it is occurring. Monitoring self-talk over a period of time and identifying patterns in behaviour that are influenced by negative self-talk will help you to identify where you need to make changes to your internal monologue.

To determine what amount of self-talk is positive and what amount is negative Malec and colleagues (2000) suggested using index cards or a small notebook. Divide the index card or notebook in half and label one side positive and the other side negative. For three or four days, throughout the day place an X on the positive side when you catch yourself saying or thinking something positive about yourself. When you catch yourself saying or thinking anything negative, put an X on the negative side. The results of this documentation will provide you with the awareness you need to change negative, irrational self-talk to positive, supportive, encouraging self-talk. Over time you will notice that it becomes more natural to think positive thoughts and that these thoughts become generalized throughout your everyday life.

Strategies for Managing the Impact of Situational Barriers

According to Stevenson (2000), a typical DE program can take up to 14 hours a week. This is a realistic calculation of what is expected of a graduate student. If you are tackling four or five six-week classes over the period of a year, you are committing yourself to 450 hours of study time. Stevenson also put forth that DE students who are organized, motivated, and self-reliant are most likely to do well in DE. Organizational skills as well as time management skills in any graduate program are essential and if you are prepared you will feel more confident, thus motivated, to do what needs to be done.
Organizational Skills. To begin with, something I found very useful at the onset of each course was to print the necessary course information from the DE program website. For each course I would print off the Course Syllabus, Course Schedule, Course Assignments, Digital Reading Room (DRR) Required Readings, and each of the Study Units and place them in a binder. A friend and recent graduate student of the CAAP program highlighted the fact that upcoming courses are often posted online a day or so before the actual start date, so this is an opportune time to get ahead of the game. She found that "mapping out" upcoming course requirements worked for her. She was able to get a better sense of what was going to happen and when. As a result, her thoughts were more organized and she could focus on what was important at that time. She described being able to break an overwhelming task (e.g., papers) down into smaller parts so that it seemed more manageable.

One strategy I found particularly useful was, at the onset of each course I would print off a Course Schedule and post it on the wall next to my computer. The schedule listed the topics for each of the 13 weeks of the course and the assignment due dates for that course. As I worked through each week (including the corresponding assignments for those weeks) I crossed it off with a red marker. It was motivating to be able to cross off each week and have this visual indicator of my weekly accomplishments. My husband would look at the schedule regularly and would mention that he noticed I crossed off another week. I believe that at times this was one of his ways of encouraging me to keep on going.

TO DO lists are a must!! Making a TO DO THIS WEEK list for each week can help keep you on track with what needs to be done weekly in each course and in the program in general. Using a TO DO TODAY list can help keep you on track for the day. As well, using a wall calendar, daytimer or your software calendar on the screen to record important dates such as when practicums start, when fees are due, when you will be meeting in a chat room with fellow students, and when you need to call your Final Project supervisor is helpful. It is also essential to document the daily living and co-curricular activities that you have going on. When you live with teenagers, their social calendar is quite important to them. Being able to plan your studying around inflexible and flexible events is essential. Over the years I planned a lot of my study time and assignments around my daughter's weekend soccer tournaments and family camping weekends. How have you kept organized and on top of assignments and readings in the past?

Being organized can save time. In these past two years of the DE program I have accumulated truckloads of journal articles (required and supplementary readings and extra articles off of the Internet). Some courses when printed off presented with so much paper and so many articles they could not be kept in a binder so I invested in plastic tubs with flat lids in order to separate the courses. These tubs piled high are much tidier than having piles of paper everywhere. (They can also be stored quite easily in the closet once you have successfully completed the program). I would indicate on each article whether it was a required or supplementary reading and which course the article belonged to. This helped keep the articles organized and handy for when I needed them to write an assignment or research paper.
STOCK UP ON OFFICE SUPPLIES! I must have gone through 100 highlighters, about as many ink cartridges and tonnes of paper. Sticky notes are essential, as are paper clips, binder clips, binders, and a stapler.

Finally, acquiring a second phone line if you have a dial-up connection to the Internet (which many who live in rural areas do) or a fax machine can alleviate a lot of frustration for those trying to call while you are on-line doing coursework. If you can afford newer technologies, high-speed options make connecting to the Internet and downloading information for classes much quicker (Stevenson, 2000).

Time Management Skills. Time management skills are essential. Any reading on the Internet, gathering of information, or other reading you can do ahead of time to prepare for the weekly Discussion Forums or an upcoming assignment is helpful. I have read in the bathtub (where it can be quiet unless you have children pounding the door down to come in), while attending to supper, while on hold with Internet technical support for two hours, and while my son played at the park with his friends. Women can be exceptional multi-taskers and multi-tasking will definitely serve you well in a DE program.

Purposeful use of time is a great skill that can be acquired with some thought. In discussion with other DE students I found that, when writing assignments or research-based papers most students tried to "kill two birds with one stone." This is something the new graduate student will want to seriously consider. Students generally have particular interests or topics they enjoy reading, learning, and writing about. Some examples are Bibliotherapy, Depth-Oriented Brief Therapy, The Grief Process, Adolescent Development, and Depression in Children. Throughout my graduate program I focused my attention on women in DE, women and stress, and women and depression. I was able to gather all of the relevant DRR required and supplementary readings, Internet articles, and assignments I wrote for this program to formulate a plan for this final project, the culminating paper to my Masters degree.

Staying informed of what is going on in your program is advantageous. Each time I logged in to the DE website I checked the Program/Course Announcements. This kept me on top of things as far as when fees were due, when the site would be down, dates instructors would be unavailable during holidays, upcoming workshops or seminars, and job postings. I felt informed and prepared at all times. This is significant because DE programs can be quite isolating. Therefore it is important to develop a routine that includes checking program announcements, student coffee rooms, your own e-mail, and follow this system each major time you log in to the program and ensure you do not miss major happenings!

Undoubtedly, familiarizing yourself with the professional writing manual that your program utilizes, such as the American Psychological Association (APA) manual (2001), can save you a lot of frustration and time. I am guilty of not reading it through and understanding it well at the beginning of the program (as suggested several times throughout the program) and having to spend a lot of time every time I wrote a paper looking things up. Basic cheat sheets can be somewhat helpful and many different ones
can be found on the Internet; however, knowing the APA in detail is crucial. One helpful website is the APA Style Resources at http://www.psywww.com/resource/apacrib.htm

Save the best for last! What I found worked for me at times was beginning to work on assignments that I thought would be most difficult and least interesting and leaving the "fun", more interesting assignments, such as the reflective/integrative papers, until the end.

We can’t forget time management in the area of household duties. I have on occasion, during the most stressful times of my graduate studies, hired someone to come into my home and clean my windows, wash my walls, or do the light dusting. Not only did this same time but it was a major motivator in helping me to clean or organize other areas of my home. Alternating nights to cook supper with your partner or having your children cook their specialty on occasion can alleviate some of the pressures around cooking. Both of my teenage daughters have taken it upon themselves to bake up a storm recently and they are very proud of their accomplishments. This has helped me tremendously in that I have less baking to do for lunches, etc. Another strategy in the area of time management is cleaning house/cooking/baking with friends. I have two close friends who get together bi-weekly to clean each others homes. One week they will spend 2-4 hours in one home making lasagne to freeze. Two weeks later they will go to the other home and help weed the garden. This works well for them and they enjoy spending time together.

Supports. Kemp (2001) asserted that "students who elicited support from friends, family, and employers were more successful in integrating academic and environmental responsibilities and were more likely to persist than those who did not receive such support" (p. 6). In considering Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Bioecological model, the female DE student is most impacted at the microsystem level/immediate environment by her family, friends, co-workers, and employer, thus gaining support and fostering connections is vital to her success. For this reason the guidebook was named Fostering Connections.

There are various types of supports defined in literature. Sarafino (2002) described five basic types of social supports that can alleviate the impact of stressors and promote health and wellness in an individual. They are:

1. Emotional support: the expression of empathy, caring, and concern toward the person. It provides the person with a sense of comfort, reassurance, belongingness, and being loved in times of stress.
2. Esteem support: occurs through people's expression of positive regard for the person, encouragement or agreement with the individual's ideas or feelings, and positive comparison of the person with others, such as people who are less able or worse off.
3. Tangible or instrumental support: involves direct assistance (monetary, helping hand).
4. Informational support: giving advice, directions or suggestion, or feedback about how a person is doing.
5. Network support: provides a feeling of membership in a group of people who share interests and social activities. (p. 99)
As mentioned previously, social supports are consistently described in the DE literature as either predictors of persistence or non-completion of courses or programs (Kemp, 2001; Picciano, 2001; Sarafino, 2002). One strategy to enable social supports includes joining the Graduate Student's Association (GSA) Council. Each year a new executive is elected. This is an ideal opportunity to meet other graduate students and participate in the various student committees (e.g., budget, final project, fundraising, graduation, practicum, political involvement). Stay abreast of all the social activities being arranged for students, workshops and seminars (for study skills or for professional enhancement) through the monthly online newsletter. It is important to remember, support from those around you can help keep you motivated, focused, determined, and a sure bet for success!

“There is nothing better than the encouragement of a good friend”
~Katherine Hathaway~

Lack of supports in childcare can be a major challenge, especially if you are a single parent. Individuals with children often do not want to burden others and end up frustrated by the lack of quiet time they have to work on their studies. Exchanging babysitting hours with other parents who are busy and have things they would like to accomplish is a convenient way of working out childcare issues. For example, I have a close friend who is a teacher. She enjoys scrapbooking and attends a scrapbooking day one Saturday each month. On those days I watch her daughter for the day and in exchange she watches my son for one other Saturday. As well, throughout the summer months I have utilized local Playground Programs. For $5 a day my son spends the day with friends, doing arts and crafts, playing water games, playground activities and I have time to accomplish necessary schoolwork. What are your friends involved in? What are some of the available resources/supports in your neighbourhood or area?

Some workplaces are quite willing to support their employee's academic endeavours. Over the years I have been given time off with pay to finish up courses, do exams, and attend Practicum Seminar weekends. My previous employer of 16 years would accommodate me by allowing me to pick shifts that allowed me to work on my studies (e.g., night shifts, casual shifts). I have also received financial support in the form of a yearly Learning Account fund and could put these monies toward my courses. It is a good idea to approach your employer to see what type of support they can provide you with in working towards higher education.

Financial support is a major hurdle that inhibits potential students from enrolling and participating in DE. For the serious student who is willing to spend some time searching there is a vast amount of information available on the Internet around DE grants, awards, and scholarships for DE students. There are all sorts of funding web sites and funding sources that can be explored. For example, AU’s Student Handbook (online) has tuition and funding information, including payment options and funding for students with disabilities. There are various types of foundations and federal government funding
programs. One useful resource in the area of funding is Krebs' (1996) Distance Learning Funding Sourcebook. This book provides information about funding agencies that support educational telecommunications and the new media, including grants, foundations, and advice on grant writing. Although searching for funding can take time it can be very rewarding. One suggestion might be to have an interested friend, family member, or your partner to do some research for you in their spare time. Who knows what they might find?

Interestingly enough, when I approached my bank over the phone they sounded reluctant and non-committal to funding a Masters degree through DE. When I arranged a meeting with the loans officer and went in with documentation of my undergraduate marks in DE, information about the graduate school, my letter of acceptance into the DE graduate program, my desire to continue (after the graduate degree) working towards becoming a chartered psychologist, financial statements, and so on, they realized I was serious. They needed to discuss the possibility of the loan through their head office and my student line of credit was approved within a week. Do not allow their reluctance to dissuade you from pursuing funding from them. Be persistent; after all, they benefit financially in the long run.

**Strategies for Managing the Impact of Institutional Barriers**

**Accurate Information:** First, being clear about your educational goals and what you need to do to go about achieving them is essential. Becoming knowledgeable about basic course and program information such as what the school has to offer as far as credentials, timelines for completing courses and program, schedules, options if you need to drop out and re-enrol at a later date are all important to consider. Strict mandatory attendance, accessibility for students with disabilities, as well as prerequisite information might influence the DE student's decision to enrol. Many students might be intimidated by the red tape involved in registering into a course or program. Information that addresses each of these concerns can be found in catalogues and student handbooks through the mail or online. Forms for registering can also be found in the catalogues or online. Phone or online access to relevant individuals can help you work through the process.

**Orientation:** Secondly, you may be mandated to participate in an orientation workshop through your DE program. This should provide you with what the program's expectations are of you as a student and what you can look forward to as far as university culture and environment. The orientation through my DE program stressed the importance of critical thinking skills and what was expected of me as a graduate level student. One article students in the CAAP program were expected to analyze and reflect on during this orientation was entitled *The Cognitive, Emotional, and Relational Characteristics of Master Therapists* by Jennings and Skovholt (1999). This foundational article really gave me a sense of what a Master Therapist should be aspiring to. Throughout the two-year program I sometimes used this article as a reference and guide when writing integrative and reflective papers and assignments. I would consider the Master Therapist characteristics, compare them to my own current characteristics as a counsellor, and this would help me to determine in what areas I had grown or needed to grow. Knowing what was expected of me at the beginning of my DE program was significant. This orientation provided me with a sense of awareness and personal connectedness with the university.
and faculty. Orientation to any program is beneficial whether it is mandatory or not. Take advantage of the opportunity.

Financial: A significant institutional barrier is program costs. Many individuals have made the decision not to enrol because program costs are too high, often before doing any research as to what options are available to them. Strategies useful for counteracting financial barriers are discussed in the “support” area of the previous section. Please check it out!

Accessing Supports: Accessing institutional supports is a necessary aspect of being a DE student. Over the years, the developers of DE programs have come to realize that a great majority of DE students are working part- or full-time and have difficulty accessing student support services, library resources, technical support, and instructors during the day. DE programs do what they can to be more accessible and accommodate adult learners by developing new programs that provide for quicker response and turnaround times in all of the aforementioned areas. Acquiring a list of academic and advising support and library services available through the university is helpful. When working on my undergraduate and graduate degree I was always amazed at how quickly I received resources in the mail from AU after ordering them by phone or online. As well, I found the AU library services to be extremely efficient. As I live fairly close to the AU, I was able to get to know one of the resource librarians. This was helpful in that I had a name, number, and e-mail address I could contact when I needed something fairly specific. I could also travel there if I needed access to materials right away.

Strategies for Managing the Impact of Sociocultural Barriers

Fostering Connections. There are several strategies that you can use to manage sociocultural barriers in DE. Fostering connections is one of the most significant enablers. Picciano (2001) maintained "Social integration and the ability to interact with others, including teachers, tutors, and other students, likewise is a very important determinant of success" (p. 94).

To begin with, sharing with fellow DE students the stressors experienced from multiple role strain can provide some relief from the pressures. The sharing of experiences, mutual support, and encouragement allows for "putting domestic and mothering roles into perspectives, and in being willing to take the risk of being less than perfect in these roles, even though they may previously have been the source of the women's identity" (von Prummer, 2000, p. 79). Becoming aware of what other female graduate DE students are feeling and how they are coping with changes in their families and keeping up with household tasks provides some normalization of the experience. When is the last time you connected with a fellow DE student and shared experiences?

von Prummer (2000) stressed the importance of connecting by phone or in person with other female DE students when working through DE courses and program. Finding another DE student or a group of female DE students to study with can help with the learning process and fulfill "the need for social contact and connectedness" (p. 204). Sharing with other DE graduate students your feelings of lack of study progress and the
general stressors of graduate studies (workload and stressful timelines, financial burden) can help lighten the load. Throughout my graduate studies I found several postings by other DE students and instructors on the course or program website that informed of social gatherings taking place in certain geographical areas. This was an ideal opportunity to meet face to face with students and faculty. As mentioned previously, the GSA is instrumental as well in informing students about upcoming events. These social gatherings provide a sense of connectedness with other DE students and their instructors.

Fostering connections through special buddy systems, is a valuable opportunity for DE students. Kramarae (2001) indicated that "some programs have special buddy systems, with successful older students acting as guides and mentors for the incoming students" (p. 58). This could be incorporated into DE programs. My DE program incorporated a similar buddy system concept into the practicum. Throughout the first practicum I was connected with a peer supervisor. We were to contact with each other once weekly to discuss our practicum placements, the practicum supervisory experience, the types of clients we were working with, the therapeutic interventions utilized with those clients, and how our schoolwork was progressing. My peer supervisor was always very positive and enthusiastic and a major motivating force. This was an immensely positive experience for me.

Indeed, as a collective, we must work towards changing the cultural image and expectations of 'woman' and 'mother.' I grew up without a father. I came to realize towards the beginning of my graduate studies that my children would have to spend a lot of time with their father. Although there were times that I felt guilty and as though I was reneging on my responsibilities as a mother in favour of schoolwork, my children have gotten to know their father better because of it. They have spent a lot of time with him and he has been very involved in raising them. They are as emotionally close to him as they are to me and this genuinely does my heart good. Fostering connections between children and their father, or other significant parent, counteracts society's views that mothers are the primary caregivers and mostly responsible for the needs of their children. This also allows women the opportunity to pursue an education without being viewed as a neglectful mother. What are your thoughts on this?

Develop your critical thinking skills! The ability to take and critically analyze information, reflect on your own beliefs and values, and share personal views in discussion with others makes you more aware of and insightful about your world.

Facione (1998) described the approaches to life and living that characterize critical thinking:

- inquisitiveness with regard to a wide range of issues;
- concern to become and remain well-informed;
- alertness to opportunities to use critical thinking;
- trust in the processes of reasoned inquiry;
- self-confidence in own abilities to reason;
- open-mindedness regarding divergent world views;
- flexibility in considering alternatives and opinions;
• understanding of the opinions of others;
• fair-mindedness in appraising reasoning;
• honesty in facing ones own biases, prejudices, stereotypes, or egocentric tendencies;
• prudence in suspending, making or altering judgements; and
• willingness to reconsider and revise views where one's reflection suggests that change is warranted. (p. 8)

To conclude, women who are adept at adopting a point of view, supporting that point of view and articulating their position are able to challenge the oppression and discrimination women face in the world in many different ways: by presenting material they are passionate about at annual conferences at local and national levels (e.g., Canadian Association for Distance Education, CADE); by writing and publishing scholarly literature from a women's perspective; by lobbying for more female representation in DE managerial, administration and academic positions; by mentoring other female DE students; by being involved in research and education, by actively lobbying for more gender-neutral course materials in DE; and so on. DE is seen as "having a potentially important contribution to make in overcoming barriers to women's participation in the developed and developing world" (Evans, 1995, p. 2).

“The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams”
~Eleanor Roosevelt~
What is Stress?

Graduate studies can be a very challenging time in a female DE student's life, especially when contending with barriers and challenges such as multiple life roles. The impact of stressors on female DE students' biopsychosocial well-being can lead to attrition and eventual non-completion of a program, so it is essential to look at what stress is and how it affects you so that you can cope with it as effectively as possible.

Firstly, stress is a very common experience and there are a wide variety of ways in which people perceive and react to stress depending on their previous learning and experiences. Researchers have conceptualized stress in three ways:

1. Stress is seen as a stimulus.
2. Stress is a response to physical and psychological strains produced by stressors.
3. Stress is a process that involves continuous transactions between person and environment. (Sarafino, 2002, p.95)

Stressors are defined by Sarafino (2002) as "physically or psychologically challenging events or circumstances" (p. 71) and can occur quite regularly in a graduate student's life. These physically and psychologically challenging events or circumstances can affect an individual's physiological functioning. There are circuits that run between the brain and the body's nervous, endocrine, circulatory, and immune systems, and when stress occurs it disrupts the body's ability to maintain homeostasis and causes the immune system to wear down. It very often causes an individual's blood pressure and heart rate to increase. Basically, stress alters immunity. The American Psychological Association (2004) indicated that "Short-term stress actually 'revs up' the immune system, an adaptive response preparing for injury or infection, but long-term or chronic stress causes too much wear and tear, and the system breaks down" (p. 1).

Further, physiological reactions to stress can involve sweating, trembling, stuttering, headaches, weight loss or gain, and body aches. Emotional reactions to stress are often influenced by cognitive appraisal processes and can include reactions such as feelings of fear, anxiety, worry, anger, guilt, grief, and depression. Behavioral reactions to stress can include crying, abuse of self and others, smoking, and irritability (Misra, 2004). In what ways do you experience stress?

Often, when people are stressed, their thinking becomes distorted. I see this on a regular basis when dealing with my mental health clients. They will often:

- exaggerate the size and the nature of the demands they are facing
- put down their ability to handle those demands
- create catastrophes around the possible outcomes of the situation
- tend to go over and over an event in their minds, dwelling on the negative aspects of the situation and their perceived inability to cope with it
- set up a "self-amplification" loop, where the very perception of becoming stressed, increases the stress level, where upon people notice that they are even
more stressed than they thought, which further increases their stress level, and so on, often resulting in a feeling out of control. (Malec and colleagues, 2000, p. 3)

To be clear, stress occurs when the demands of a situation outweigh an individual's coping resources. Often when the demands of a situation far exceed coping resources, then the stress phenomenon of burnout can occur. Early warning signs of burnout include "physical exhaustion, depersonalization, feeling a lack of accomplishment, feeling like the work will never end, and lack of desire to cope" (Hiebert, n.d.a., p. 8).

Stress has also been linked to various medical conditions. There is vast evidence linking chronic stress to "gastro-intestinal problems, sleep disorders, headaches, heart attacks, flu, frequent colds, cancer, skin problems, depression, and chronic pain" (Hiebert, n.d.a, p. 4). Fullerton and Ursano (1997) maintained that some experts in the medical field consider stress to be the chief health and social problem we, as a society, are contending with today. These points are quite concerning.

Hegadoren, researcher at the University of Alberta (UofA) Faculty of Nursing, went on to describe that "a key factor in the development of depression in women is stress and that the most common response to a serious stressor in women is depression" (as cited in Dewar, 2001, p. 1). Clinical depression is an illness. Generally it begins because of a stressful situation, but then it can continue independent of that initial situation (Depression Help For You, 2004).

Hiebert (n.d.b ) clearly identified five possible explanations for the recent increase in stress-related medical conditions. (1) People are faced with more intense and frequent demands, causing them to experience more stress. (2) The world is changing so rapidly and people's knowledge and skills are not able to keep up with the demands placed upon them, causing them undue stress. (3) In 1929, Cannon identified the "fight or flight" concept, which explained physiological reactions humans and animals experienced when faced with dangerous external stressors. Stressors today are more cognitive in nature and the fight or flight stress response is not as well suited to dealing with demands that individuals currently face. (4) People's sensitivity to perceived stress in reaction to what is going on in the world regularly is perhaps rendering people more defenceless against constant stress. (5) Some individuals are more vulnerable to stress than others and will react to stress in different ways. There are individuals who are mainly "cognitive responders" and some who are mainly "physiological responders". Some will experience heart attacks in response to stress while others experience stomach problems and or headaches.

Simply stated, "environmental, physical, cognitive, behavioral, and emotional systems interact and draw on our coping resources to achieve a balanced system (homeostasis)" (Hiebert, n.d.a, p. 3). Stress, in itself, is a sign of something in a woman’s life that is out of proportion or requires attention. According to Hiebert (n.d.a), an individual's coping resources including skills such as accurate appraisal of stressful situations, others who might be recruited to help in stressful situations, and people or agencies that an individual experiencing stress might not be aware of such as a local Mental Health clinic, or their Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Don’t forget that one
needs to *hear* what stress is telling, not merely trying to get rid of it or reduce it, although of course this is important.

**Strategies for Alleviating Stress**

One of the most significant and helpful things I have learned in the CAAP program is that the relaxation response is exactly physiologically opposite to that of the stress response. The main characteristics of the relaxation response are reduced heart rate, breathing rate, muscle tension, sweat gland activity, blood pressure, increased finger temperature, stomach motility, creativity, and blood flow to the creative centres of the brain. By learning relaxation techniques, you can place your body in a state that is the opposite of stress (Malec et al. 2000). This is what you want when you are experiencing stress.

This can be achieved by using procedures such as biofeedback, progressive muscle relaxation training, autogenic training, transcendental meditation, yoga, other kinds of meditation, self-hypnosis, and Benson's relaxation response (Malec et al. 2000). To explore each of these is beyond the scope of this guidebook; thus the focus here is on three very different but gentle, mindful procedures that have all been proven effective in alleviating stress in individuals. They are: progressive muscle relaxation training, mindfulness meditation, and journal writing.

*Progressive Muscle Relaxation Training*

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) has proven to be highly effective with individuals who are stressed and needing to relax. It allows the individual to control feelings of tension by focusing attention on certain muscle groups while alternately tightening and relaxing these muscles. Although there are various versions of the PMR technique, Hiebert's Auto Suggestive Relaxation Script (Malec et al. 2000) is very thorough and effective and I have practiced this regularly since learning about it in the CAAP 615 Intervening to Facilitate Client Change, Stress Management module. As well, I currently teach this method to my mental health clients as well as in parenting classes, and these participants really appreciate how relaxed they feel afterwards. You might want to do some research and find a different script/method that works for you.

Hiebert (Malec et al, 2000) suggests that you read through and familiarize yourself with the script. Once you have done so, attempt to instruct yourself to relax using the script. To illustrate, a progressive muscle relaxation session generally begins with making yourself comfortable in a quiet place. It follows with the suggestions to tighten and relax your muscles gradually from right fist to left fist, wrists to forearms, biceps to shoulders, neck to scalp, face to eyelids, all the way down the body into the feet. Hiebert's aforementioned script is written using very soothing and relaxing words such as "Now feel the pleasant feeling of deep relaxation flow up through your neck, and across the top of your head," and "Now let the warm and heavy feeling of deep relaxation spread up into your wrists" (p. 5). Once completed, you should feel rested, calm and profoundly relaxed. He suggests reading the script into a cassette recorder and playing it to yourself when you are ready and able to relax. Taking your heart and respiration rate, and your finger
temperature (with a thermometer) before the session and after practice which will give you a baseline and record of the changes in your stress level.

Malec et al. (2000) suggested that participants keep a record of their practice time each day so they can compare their findings over time. I would utilize this method for 15 minutes at a time and I could see the difference in my ability to relax within three days. Malec et al. stressed that individuals with hypotension (chronically low blood pressure), those taking medication that lowers blood pressure or heart rate, and people who are diabetic need to take some precautions when beginning a relaxation program, as relaxation affects the body's normal functioning.

Mindfulness Meditation

Mindfulness Meditation is also known as insight meditation (Kabat-Zinn, 1993) and has been in existence for approximately 2,500 years. Kabat-Zinn states that this type of meditation stems from Buddhist tradition and was developed as a means of cultivating greater awareness and wisdom, with the aim of helping people live each moment of their lives – even the painful ones – as fully as possible" (p. 260).

Mindfulness meditation is generally practiced in the sitting position. Groves (1993), in her helpful text Meditation for Busy People (MBP), describes four simple steps:

1. Relax (unwind the muscles and become physically quiet). Up to 5 minutes. Can be shorter as appropriate.
2. Centre (focus on the breathing cycle and develop the capacity to witness the mind without getting lost in it). Start with 5 minutes, then increase as you feel the inclination.
3. Enhance (visualize goals, focus on patience and forgiveness, or perform any other personally significant mental practice – this step is optional). Five to 10 minutes.
4. Release (return to waking consciousness and reinforce the meditative experience). One to 5 minutes. (p. 21)

The two major classifications of meditation are transcendental and mindfulness. Mindfulness meditation is significantly different from transcendental meditation in that rather than focusing on a sound, phrase, or prayer to minimize distracting thoughts (as in transcendental meditation), mindfulness allows you to focus on whatever thoughts, sensations, and feelings (including painful ones) that come to mind (Kabat-Zinn, 1993). I found mindfulness meditation to be more realistic in terms of expectations around focusing. There is no way I could sit for 15 to 30 minutes daily without thoughts of schoolwork, my children, housework, or my job entering my mind.

Some individuals might have difficulty practicing meditation, as they believe that it is time wasted. Meditation does involve hard work, discipline, and commitment and for many it becomes easier the more often they practice. Kabat-Zinn (1993) maintained "the inherent difficulty of meditation practice is made easier by the profound states of relaxation and pleasant feelings it frequently produces" (p. 261).
I can testify to the fact that an inner peace and tranquility envelop the participant and allow for a more clear view of and understanding of the world and life’s circumstances with practice. An individual is able to respond more appropriately and effectively to everyday situations. Kabat-Zinn (1993) described mindfulness this way:

Observing your thoughts and emotions as if you had taken a step back from them, you can see much more clearly what is actually on your mind. You can see your thoughts arise and recede one after another. You can note the content of your thoughts, feelings associated with them, and your reactions to them. You might become aware of agendas, attachments, likes and dislikes, and inaccuracies in your ideas. You can gain insight into what drives you, how you see the world, who you think you are – insight into your fears and aspirations. (p. 262)

An awareness of breathing and the ability to concentrate are essential to the practice of mediation. Kabat-Zinn (1993) expressed that meditation is "a gentle but powerful form of body-oriented meditation in its own right, and a way of cultivating musculoskeletal strength, flexibility, and balance as well as inner stillness and mindfulness" (p. 265). Kabat-Zinn and Groves (1993) assert that meditation should be practiced daily just as any other daily routine. Although I do not practice as often as I should, when I do take the time, I am able to function more effectively, with more clarity of mind. In what ways have you meditated in the past?

Journal Writing

Journals of historical events, written by the Chinese, have been in existence since the first century A.D. There is evidence of journals being used for personal expression from the Renaissance when "the shift in philosophy emphasized the importance of the individual over the community" (Youga, 1995, p. 137). Throughout history, journal writing has been used as "a response to some outside force – environmental changes such as imprisonment or travel, moments of political or social crisis when the writer recognized the meshing of her or his personal life with momentous political events" (Youga, p. 137). Women have used journal writing as an effective means of expressing themselves and to document their experiences throughout history. Youga stressed the value and importance of journalling indicating that it allows for privacy of thought, freedom of expression and is an attempt to understand the world.

Over the last 30 years journal writing has proved to researchers to be an effective means of self-expression and understanding of oneself in context. Journalling can help writers to make sense of their often chaotic and stressful circumstances and provide clarity and insight on life. Journals have been used to work through the problem solving process, cost versus benefits analysis of particular situations, goal setting, working through past issues in an individual's life, self-esteem exercises, and self-understanding activities.

Although graduate students might feel they don't have the time to journal, an expected part of the CAAP program (for practica especially) is for students to reflect on their personal and professional or academic experiences and write integrative papers. I
have very often throughout the program tried to kill two birds with one stone as mentioned previously. I have used journalling throughout the CAAP to try to gain a better perspective on my life and to fulfill assignment requirements at the same time.

*Other Methods of Alleviating Stress*

Humor and positive thinking are important tools in stress management. Laughing releases endorphins in the brain that make you feel relaxed and refreshed. During my studies, when needing to relieve stress, I rented a comedy and sat with my family to watch it. As well, when stressed I have sought out and spent time with individuals who are positive and provide me with a sense of optimism. When is the last time you were able to experience a deeply felt bout of laughter?

Creativity can be an amazing outlet for some individuals. For those who are crafty, pottery classes, woodworking, sewing, crocheting, oil painting, or metalsmithing are great activities that will help you escape from the pressure of your studies for a few hours and provide you with some stress relief. Music is another alternative. Learning how to play the guitar, the piano or just listening to some relaxing music can bring some sense of joy. What about a dance class? Belly dancing? Hip Hop? Latin Dance? Ballroom Dance might be an option for those who would like to get out for some time away with their partner. Enjoying time away (with others?) being creative makes getting back to the old drawing board much easier.

Quite often, the stress of graduate studies takes its toll and there is very little that anyone can do or say to make it better. It is then vital that you seek professional help in dealing with your experience. A professional (e.g., psychologist, Mental Health Therapist, EAP counsellor) can help you to understand the stress and find ways to help you to alleviate it.

*Successes and Celebrations*

Rezabek (1999) described DE as "perhaps one of the most dynamic and challenging forms of learning that exists today" (p. 22). Most students who have embarked on courses or programs through DE would, in all likelihood, agree. DE can be intimidating when you consider the technology you must become familiar with and the other graduate DE students you will communicate with regularly. But there is no greater feeling than that of finally completing a course or program after much time and effort. Picciano (2001) defined success in DE studies as "students who have completed a course or program of study" (p. 94). Indeed, it is so much more. Succeeding in DE influences every aspect of your life. It enhances self-confidence and allows you to see the world in a different light through reflection and opens up possibilities for the future. Success in DE provides insight and encourages living life in a more meaningful and fulfilling way. Success in DE promotes acknowledgment of diversity and tolerance of those around you (family, friends, other cultures) and ultimately enhances your personhood.
Successes

Many success stories of women in DE are documented in the literature. Athabasca University's *Bridging the Distance* (2004) is "A Publication for Alumni and Friends of Athabasca University" commemorating 10 years of offering graduate degree programs. This remarkable booklet introduces three extraordinary women and three extraordinary men who have succeeded in obtaining graduate degrees by DE through AU, Canada's Open University. One of these women is presented here.

**Story #1- Shelley Evans: Dare to Dream**

Shelley Evans earned her Master of Arts degree through AU in June 2004. Nine years earlier, she had completed the coursework for a Master of Environmental Studies at a traditional university and did not complete her thesis because she became pregnant. Several years later, Shelley "couldn't help dreaming about that degree" (Athabasca University, 2004b, p. 8) so she decided to enrol in the Master of Distance Education program through AU. The following year Shelley switched to the Master of Arts – Integrated (MAIS) program, also through AU, which recognized and accepted previously completed coursework towards the degree. Shelley is currently self-employed doing historical research that "will be used in a class action suit dealing with fishing rights for First Nations in Port Alberni, British Columbia" (p. 9). The research she is doing directly relates to the thesis she wrote for the MAIS program. In describing her experience with DE she stated:

> That's what really worked for me, and it happens to so many people. You're trying to do your education, but life just happens. It seems that's always the case with women. If they have kids, if they have other commitments, women will often give it up. As a woman, a wife, a mother, it's been so awesome that I could get to this level of education, and that's how I ended up at AU. (Athabasca University, 2004b, p.8)

One thing that struck me in Shelley’s commentary is when she indicated that women will often give up their education because of children and other commitments. With the accessibility and flexibility of DE this need not occur. This is evidenced in her story.

Lunneborg (1994) interviewed 14 women who pursued their post-secondary degrees through the OU in Britain. She documented their overall DE experiences in her book OU: Undoing Educational Obstacles and I have identified the most memorable success and celebration of one of these special women.

**Story #2- Frances Smith: Possibilities**

Frances Smith expressed a long-time desire to learn about science (especially botany), but felt that because her parents did not understand the subject she was effectively barred
from learning about it. As an adult she was able to pursue an OU degree in the sciences and stated:

> I knew a little bit about how a scientific experiment was conducted, but I'd never actually done one. And now I have. And I know how to do another. I can set up an experiment on any subject within my competence. I would know how to do it, I would know how to analyze it, and I would know whether it meant anything or not. The OU has opened up every possibility. (Lunneborg, 1994, p. 45)

Frances Smith and her husband own Park Hill Produce and Appledore Salads and grow specialist salads and vegetables for chefs. Frances described using each of her OU courses in "biology, geology, soil sciences, genetics, and physiology to enhance the productivity of the various ecosystems running at Park Hill" (Lunneborg, 1994, p. 45).

I appreciated Frances’s comment “The OU has opened up every possibility”. Education and knowledge opens the door to opportunities for and the empowerment of women. Frances is proof of this.

Kanwar and Taplin, (Eds) (2001) examined the cases of 23 women succeeded in DE despite adversity in their lovely book *Brave New Women of Asia: How Distance Education Changed Their Lives*. The women in these poignant, heart-warming stories are from China, Hong Kong (SAR, China), India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. I have highlighted one woman from Hong Kong, SAR China and one woman from Pakistan.

**Story #3- Mabel Tam Fung-Yi: Inspiration For Her Daughters**

Taplin (2001) introduced Mabel Tam Fung-Yi who was born in Hong Kong. Her parents divorced when she was seven and because she was the baby she was the only one of her siblings sent by the court to live with her mother. Mabel's mother was depressed by the divorce and spent most of her days playing mah-jong (a gambling game for four players that originated in China). They lived in an area where drug dealing and illegal gambling were common.

While growing up, Mabel's mother many times argued with her to quit school and go to work in order to supplement their income. Mabel would beg her mother to allow her to remain in school and would do what she could after her school day to help her mother earn extra income. Mabel would help her mother sew doll clothes, took full responsibility of an infant her mother was being paid to care for so that her mother could play mah-jong, and worked illegally (she was underage at 10 years old) during her summers in a factory. Some of this money went to help pay for her school fees. Mabel completed her secondary schooling and wanted to go on with her education, but her mother insisted she go to work full-time to help support them. Mabel found employment as a full-time clerk at her former secondary school.
Mabel realized the self-fulfillment and financial stability that being a teacher would bring and decided to apply to college. She was not able to get in because she did not meet all of the requirements, so she undertook self-study to get the math course she needed. She saved enough money to enrol in and attend the Technical Teacher's College two-year full-time program, against her mother's wishes. Mabel worked part-time as an accounts clerk and private tutor while completing her studies. Once she graduated she went to work as a full-time teacher at a pre-vocational school.

Mabel married and had two daughters. She decided that she would like to get more formal qualifications, but had reservations. Mabel was unsure whether, at the age of 40, she could manage studying with family duties and work. After consulting with her husband, who was ambivalent, but willing to support her, she applied to the Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK). Mabel formed a study group with several of her classmates, which provided her with esteem and social support and she rewarded herself and her family along the way, which kept her encouraged. Mabel involved her children in her studying by promising them a meal at McDonald's if she achieved 70% or higher on an assignment or exam. Her daughters (aged nine and six when she started) provided her with support and looked forward to helping her open the envelopes that contained her assignment and exam results as they came in the mail. Over a four-year period Mabel succeeded in earning a Bachelor of Primary Education.

Mabel’s story touched my heart. She persevered when all odds were stacked against her. Despite having to struggle with her mother every step of the way she managed to overcome the barriers and succeed. I could especially relate to her intentional involvement of her daughters in the educational process. In essence her success brought excitement and triumph to the family.

*Story #4- Shahnaz Basheer: Sharing Differences*

Durrani (2001) introduced Shahnaz Basheer who was born in Pakistan in 1980 into a lower middle-class family. She had four older brothers and one younger sister. Shahnaz's father worked as an attendant in a local hospital and her mother as a housewife and quite often there was not enough money for the family to have three meals a day.

As a child, before she began her primary schooling Shahnaz recalls helping her mother with daily chores. Once she began school, she would help her mother after school. After Shahnaz completed her Class V and her younger sister was born Shahnaz was made by her mother to stay home and help. Shahnaz's desire was to study in school and, whenever she could, she would borrow a friend's books to read.

In the Pakistani school system an individual can study the necessary courses, pay a fee, and enrol to take exams without attending classes. With her parents' reluctant permission Shahnaz studied the nine subjects, paid the fee, took her Class VIII exams and passed them. Shahnaz's happiness was dampened when her desire for even further education was frowned upon by her parents and older brothers.
They thought that it was against their family prestige to let their women leave the four walls of the house. They said that people would comment that they could not provide food to their womenfolk, therefore they were educating them to get jobs for themselves. That would bring a bad name to their family. (Durrani, 2001, p. 47)

Shahnaz met a woman primary school teacher in her neighbourhood and this woman encouraged her to continue with her schooling. Her family was not supportive of her decision to continue her education, but allowed her to do so until they found her a husband. Shahnaz's mother became ill, so it became Shahnaz's responsibility to dust, clean, wash utensils and clothes, and prepare the family's meals. She accomplished these tasks while studying for her Class X, often late into the night while everyone was asleep. Shahnaz also started a small side business (unbeknownst to her brothers) and in 1½ years set aside enough money to pay for her Class X examination fees. Although she spent time preparing with the help of her friend she failed in three of the subject areas, became depressed, discouraged, and quit.

Shahnaz was 17 when her mother found her a match. He was an attractive and illiterate taxi cab driver. Shahnaz had many difficulties settling into this new family. They were very different from her family, uneducated and emotionally abusive towards her. They ridiculed the fact that she had education, criticized her housekeeping skills, and would not allow her to socialize outside the home. They would pressure her to ask her parents (who were not allowed to visit her) for more money over and above her dowry and when she refused they became difficult, threatening her with divorce. Shahnaz's husband began beating her regularly for not following his orders. At one point, even though she was pregnant, he "expected her to spend a night with one of his friends who was offering him handsome money" (Durrani, 2001, p. 48). When she refused to sleep with his friend he beat her to the point where she needed to be taken to the hospital and then he refused to take her. During the pregnancy her in-laws would not provide her with proper meals, and after she gave birth to her daughter they sent her and her daughter back home to her parents. Shahnaz left with nothing but her daughter wrapped in a blanket. Although Shahnaz's parents empathized with her the family was disgraced by her divorce.

Shahnaz was disappointed, felt hopeless and, although she had thoughts about committing suicide, she knew she must live for her daughter. At that time she decided that she must become educated in order to become financially independent, provide her daughter with the life she wanted for her, and help her aging parents. Shahnaz was made aware of the Women's Secondary Educational Programme at Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) and, with money saved from her stitching business, enrolled. Shahnaz struggled through the courses and at one point had used most of her savings. She was quite fortunate to find a job as a teacher at a local primary school. With courage and persistence Shahnaz completed her matriculation certification (Xth class) in 2000. Shahnaz expressed:

In many people's opinions it was not a big achievement, but for me, it meant a lot. Now I can apply for many jobs like midwifery, health visitor, and teacher in a vocational centre. I was glad. Without that certificate I had nothing to be proud
about. Education provided me opportunities to improve my life and I did.  
(Durrani, 2001, p. 50)

Shahnaz’s resiliency really moved me. She overcame obstacles that could have easily broken her spirit. Shahnaz’s will to survive and the love she had for her child allowed her to push through life circumstance and come out a champion.

Celebrations

Many of the women in Lunneborg's (1994) study, who studied through the OU in Britain, described their learning experiences through DE as significant and meaningful. For many it was a life-altering experience that positively affected various aspects of their lives. These celebrations are captured in the following quotations.

DE through the OU was a catalyst for Teresa Davis in that she was able to become a cytogeneticist. In the process she became more articulate, which enabled her to cope better with situations. She stated:

I'm much more able to say what I think without getting into a panic. If I'm having difficulty communicating with somebody, I go away and think, Now this is what I really want to say, and this is how I need to overcome this difficulty, and then I approach them and with a bit of luck and the confidence, I'm able to transmit it in a reasonable form. The OU brought me here in the first place, and then coping with things gives me more confidence. (Lunneborg, 1994, p. 76)

Helen Seddon described a history of feeling as though she was no good at anything academic. She expressed that the OU was "open for everybody and it opened lots of mental doors for me" (Lunneborg, 1994, p. 85). Through the OU arts degree she was able to bolster her self-image.

I wanted to be able to look at everything around me in a more informed, analytical and educated way, so I did mainly arts courses. I'd hear people going to a play and they would be analyzing it and I'd think, I never thought of it like that. And it makes me happy now that I can walk around London and look at the architecture and I know its history. (Lunneborg, 1994, p. 84)

Edith Tharpe said "the OU made me much more tolerant of what my children must be going through and I'm much better able to cope with them than if I'd kept my old narrow views where things were black and white" (Lunneborg, 1994, p. 93). She described how earning a degree through OU has given her confidence.

Things I couldn't do before, I can do now. Like talking to you here, once I would shy away from anything that was a challenge, I would think, I can't do it. My problem-solving ability has got much sharper. I can read and pick up and home in on the important and discard the unimportant quite easily. I don't worry so much anymore about whether I am saying the right thing. I just say what I feel" (Lunneborg, 1994, p. 95).
Janaki Mahendran (Lunneborg, 1994, p. 128) maintained that "my OU studies give me self-validation. I think it is much better than other degrees because it becomes a part of your life and if you can do it, you value yourself more at the end of it."

Kushalta Saini stated:

I was able to manage my time very, very well with the OU and organize myself generally. And I accepted that it's not a perfect world; you can't do everything. The first year I started, it was, oh, I haven't listened to this radio programme, this is really bad. You let things get on top of you. But I learned that one year you might be able to do 95 per cent of the work, but you can't do that every year because there are other things going on in your life. It made me learn how to pick and choose and prioritize what are the important things to do. (Lunneborg, 1994, p. 67)

Shirleen Stibbe stated:

My family was vital to my OU success. My husband pushed me through it. I'd get despondent, I can't get this CMA done, I can't pass this exam. "Come on," he'd say, "you said the same thing last year. You said the same thing the year before." I couldn't have stuck it out to such a committed degree without him there, egging me on. (Lunneborg, 1994, p. 108)

Val Burke described working full-time and how her family of two daughters and husband help out with household duties on a regular basis.

Everybody in our house gets their own breakfast, Sarah and Judy get their own tea – toasted cheese sandwiches or frozen pizzas – they get their lunch at school, and I do dinner for Tom and me when I get home, but it's usually convenience food out of the freezer. Tom washes up, somebody feeds the washing machine, Tom does my ironing for me, the girls do their own ironing. I don't do housework at all until it's got to the state where I can't relax. So then I do the whole house and forget it for a week or two. (Lunneborg, 1994, p. 133)

In an interview discussing her distance learning experience, a 56-year-old married Salvation Army program director found that:

Acquiring my bachelor's degree at the tender age of 54 was intense but the day I was finally able to walk into graduate school was unimagined bliss. Distance learning is a great boost to higher education, especially for women who still carry the duties of work as well as household. When we can use cable TV for a class, or, better yet, the Internet for a class, it is a real privilege. (Kramarae, 2001, p. 17)

DE has benefited these women to a great degree in many different areas of their lives. Their hopes and dreams for the future were realized through perseverance and hard work, something we, as DE students can surely identify with.
Summary

Although DE courses and programs may seem formidable to the prospective female graduate DE student, they are very promising alternatives to traditional classroom based-education and female DE students from Canada, United States, Europe, Asia and Australia are reaping the benefits. Women are using DE to better their personal and professional lives and the lives of their families and communities and they are excited by the opportunities DE can provide them. Kanwar and Taplin (2001) believe that:

These days it is becoming not only a luxury for those women who are capable of doing so to participate in higher education, but a necessity for improving the quality of their economic, social, and spiritual lives and/or coping with changes to their living standards, as well as for providing protection from exploitation. Further, without appropriate levels of education, opportunities are being restricted for these women to fulfil their collective responsibility to participate in bringing about social change. (p. 5)

DE opens the door to opportunities for basic human rights. It increases possibilities for equal opportunities and social justice for all women.

Conclusion

The fact that most DE learners are women and that these women face a multitude of barriers and challenges (including multiple life roles) speaks to the importance of the development of this relevant, useful resource. I hope this guidebook has provided you with valuable knowledge in the area of DE and insight into the issues and perspectives of many women in DE. Knowledge of the various barriers and challenges that women experience is the first step in learning how to overcome these stressors. Learning strategies for coping with stressors is necessary to increase your sense of empowerment, which can lead to successful completion of your studies. Success leads to the enhancement of self-confidence, provides you with new perspectives, new opportunities, and more meaning in life. It promotes greater understanding and acceptance of diversity, increases tolerance, resilience, and inevitably enhances personhood. And remember…

“All great achievements require time”
~Maya Angelou~
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