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ABSTRACT

This 2002 dissertation investigated community college administrators' perceptions of the importance of orientations for distance learners at community colleges in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. Because distance learning has grown rapidly in the United States in recent years, challenges have arisen regarding how to prepare and support distance-learning students. In order to assess the importance and effectiveness of distance learning orientations in preparing and supporting students, surveys were mailed to administrators at all of the technical and community colleges in six Western states, and a 57% response rate was achieved. Follow-up telephone surveys were then conducted with select administrators. Two-thirds of the administrators surveyed indicated that their institutions were offering orientations of some kind for their distance learners, yet they perceived merely average student satisfaction with the orientations. However, administrators believed that orientations are important for their distance learners and will improve students' success rates. In addition, administrators perceived certain types of distance learning orientations to be more important and effective than others. The most important types of distance learning orientations included technology familiarity, accession of course materials, utilization of library/electronic resources, and discussions about registration processes, transcripts, and grades. Contains 18 tables, appendices, and 86 references. (CB)

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A STUDY OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE ADMINISTRATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF ORIENTATIONS IN DISTANCE LEARNING

ED 474 580

by
Valerie Dee Ludwig

A dissertation submitted to the Adult Learning & Technology Department
and The Graduate School of the University of Wyoming
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
in
EDUCATION

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Distance education has been growing rapidly in the United States during the last several years. Among the many reasons for this growth is the changing technology which is enabling more and more people to access higher education opportunities. Other reasons include demographic changes and the job market. Many of these new distance learners are adults with multiple responsibilities. The growth of distance education is presenting many challenges to community colleges and other higher educational institutions.

One challenge is how to support students who are learning at a distance. This need for distant learner support is largely uncharted territory since most of the research in distance learning has been on how to deliver the courses, not how support the students. Orientations to distance learning delivery may provide support to the distance learners so that they may become more empowered and successful learners.

In order to provide support for distance learners, college administrators will need to become more aware of the need for and importance of various support options including orientations. The purpose of this study was to investigate community college administrators' perceptions of the importance of orientations for distance learners. The study explored the availability of orientations for distance learners at community colleges in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States.

The results showed that a majority (96.5 percent) of the respondents' colleges were offering distance education courses. One-third of the institutions were offering complete degree programs, but most of the institutions were offering individual courses which

equated to less than 10 percent of their total institution's offerings. Two-thirds of the administrators indicated their institutions were offering orientations of some kind for their distance learners; however, their perceived level of student satisfaction for distance orientations was only average. Administrators perceive that developing orientations for their distance learners will improve their students' success rates. The study also showed that there were significant differences in the perceptions of administrators as to the importance of various types of distance learning orientations.

To The Graduate School:

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Finally, I would like to acknowledge the support of my mother, my husband, and my children. With their help and encouragement, I have been able to juggle my multiple roles and responsibilities. Since I endorse McClusky's Theory of Margin, I can embrace the concept of "power" which can be increased with the support of others.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Distance education is growing at a rapid rate in the United States. Between 1994-95 and 1997-98, the number of higher education institutions offering distance education increased from 33 percent to 44 percent (Distance education at postsecondary institutions, 1997-98). Furthermore, this number was expected to increase to two-thirds of all postsecondary institutions and 91 percent of public institutions within 3 years (Lewis, Farris, & Alexander, 1997). In 1997-1998, 62 percent of the two-year public educational institutions were offering distance education and an additional 18 percent were planning on offering distance education by 2001 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1998-1999). Distance education typically refers to "any formal approach to learning in which the majority of the instruction occurs when the educator and learner are distant from one another" (Verduin & Clark, 1991, p. 8). The majority of higher education institutions in the United States now have distance education courses with many of them being able to offer complete programs (Matthews, 1999). Perhaps one of the biggest growth areas is in the area of online or internet courses. More than 700,000 students took online (distance) courses in 1998. J. Marcus (1999) says this number is expected to triple by 2002.

Changing technology is one of the reasons for the growth in distance learning opportunities. Today's technology is allowing institutions of higher learning to reach populations in a variety of settings such as businesses, hospitals, prisons, colleges, and

individual homes. Rural communities are able to receive the same educational offerings as those available in urban areas (Niemi, Ehrhard, & Neeley, 1998). These changes are opening doors for learners not previously able to participate in higher education opportunities.

A second reason for growth in distance education is that over 70 percent of all jobs in the United States require education beyond the high school level which will require more people to become better educated; further education of an existing labor market usually occurs while people are employed (Department of Labor, 1998). The job market is becoming more technology-driven, and this has been a major catalyst for the increased demand for courses and programs for adults already in the labor-force (Green, 2001). In addition, the number of high school graduates entering postsecondary education is at an all time high (Lewis, Farris, Alexander, 1997). These changes add to the demand for distance learning opportunities.

The biggest growth in the numbers of distance learners is typically coming from the part-time students, ages 25 and older, who are making up 40 percent of the overall enrollment in higher education, compared with 28 percent in 1970 (Marcus, D., 2000). This same population, while studying part-time, is engaged in other full-time activities (McInnes-Rankin & Brindley, 1986). Distance learning is reaching many students who could not attend or take college classes on campus. In fact, A Survey of Traditional and Distance Learning Higher Education Members, commissioned by the National Education Association (2000), showed that 70 percent of distance learning faculty members think it is extremely or very likely that distance learning will reach students who would not have

been able to enroll in traditional college courses. Dennis Jones, NCHEMS President, (NCHEMS, 2001) estimates that by 2003, 60 percent of learners in higher education will be accessing their course content electronically. The most current data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2002) reveals that in 1999-2000, 8.4 percent of higher education undergraduate students took distance education courses. This equates to about 1.3 million students.

The growth of distance education is presenting many challenges to community colleges and other higher education institutions. One critical issue is how to support students who are learning at a distance (Granger & Benke, 1998; Paul, 1988; Oaks, 1996).

While most community and technical colleges offer courses by distance education, they are challenged to provide the full range of instructional and student support services needed for facilitating student success and for expanding college programs. If educational institutions seek to attract and serve larger numbers of these part-time distance learners, they may have to develop increased and highly visible student-support services (Thompson, 1989). Many adult students have been out of school for many years, and they may lack basic literacy and study skills. They may be uncertain about their educational goals. Although they may be more autonomous in many ways than traditional campus-based students, there are a series of challenges unique to distance learners (Paul, 1988). As online learning grows in popularity, institutions are having difficulty creating a cohesive approach to online student services (Jones, 2001). In a review of literature, the role of learner support services, including instructional and

student support, is just now being explored to see how these services may be translated successfully to distance learning environments.

Background of the Problem

The need for distant learner support services is largely uncharted territory since the primary research, up until recently, has been on how to deliver the courses, not necessarily the services. As data indicate, distance education students tend to be older, part time, more diverse, and more autonomous than traditional students, and some may question if institutions should have to pay any particular attention to support services for distance learners (Thompson, 1989). Others, however, believe the success in attracting, retaining, and serving students will hinge more on excellent student support services than on any technology issues (Oaks, 1996). Granger and Benke (1998) indicate that knowing who the learners are and what is available to them is critical when trying to provide distance learner support, and that designing support programs with the student perspective in mind will help distance learners be more successful.

What are student support services for distance learning? The types of learner support services may be defined in numerous ways and often include advising, counseling, tutoring, study strategies assistance, and library services (McInnis-Rankin & Brindley, 1986). Tait (1995) suggests that activities include advising/counseling, tutoring individually and in groups, study and examination taking skills, peer group support, feedback on assessment and progress, language support, careers guidance, and

administrative problem solving. Other support services include orientations, workshops, and seminars (Paul, 1988).

The variety of student support services listed above suggest that one primary service that may be critical to students' success includes providing orientations in various areas of student support (Granger & Benke, 1998; Paul, 1988). Orientations may vary from understanding how to access student resources at a distance to understanding how the technology of the course works. Providing and developing orientations on learner support services that go beyond the delivery of the courses may help distance students become more successful learners.

Perceptions of administrators. College administrators are slowly becoming aware of the importance of providing services to distance learners. "While most community and technical colleges individually offer courses by distance education, they are increasingly challenged to provide the full range of instructional and student support services needed for expanding distance education programs" (Baker & Wolff, 1998, p.27). One study (Dirr, 1999) revealed that most institutions have not yet made adaptations in support services for distance learners. Administrators at Grambling University in Louisiana were led to examine their support services as they were trying to respond to the need to expand distance learning offerings to their isolated populations (Lowery & Barnes, 1996). To impact the overall distance learner support, administration must be involved to facilitate this change.

One of the most critical responsibilities that administrators have is that of strategic planning and budgeting which is based on input and data from constituents. It is the job

of administrators to determine whether the resources needed to accomplish distance learning objectives and goals are available and what support services are necessary (Kearsley, 1996). McKey (2001) presents a model for distance learning which has administration as the foundation level and indicates that it is the most important layer since it provides resources to all above it. Administrative understanding of what services should be offered is a first step to then allocating the dollars and personnel to be able to make it happen. In response to the need for support services, McKey (2001), says that the concept of customer service may be one of the underlying premises to developing successful distance learner support services. Deciding what services will be offered or developed will be determined by various constituents at the colleges led by two primary types of administrators: instructional and student services administrators.

Orientations. Providing an orientation to a program, courses, or technology may be a primary consideration for distance educators (Granger & Benke, 1998). One definition of orientation for distance learning may be a session which increases students' familiarity and comfort level with the equipment, technology, and structure of their course (Nelson, 1988). Helping students become comfortable with the technology and their learning environment is an important support service. Orientations for students may help them become proficient with the equipment and technology in their distance course or program and can help reduce students' anxiety levels about the technology. Included in these sessions should be an overview of what type of technological difficulties might arise during the term (Nelson, 1988).

In addition, students need to know how to participate in discussions and adapt presentations for the medium (Boschmann, 1995). Students need to know how to access electronic and informational resources such as library services for electronic journals and interlibrary loan resources (Heller-Ross, 1999). Still other orientations may be topics on accessing institutional resources (WSU online guidelines, 2000). An overall review of orientations reflect a mix of general academic, course content, and hardware use issues.

Providing support services such as orientations in distance education is an issue that deserves and needs careful thought and planning. Paul (1988) said, "I am an advocate of student services because I believe that distance education institutions are doing worse than a mediocre job if they encourage adults to return to formal education only to leave them to experience yet another failure and hence to do them a greater disservice than would have been the result of not serving them at all (p. 55)."

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of the study was to investigate community college administrators' perceptions of orientation sessions for distance education classes. The orientations in distance education programs may include sessions on the use of the technology, personal student-characteristics, study techniques and strategies, or other student support services.

The following research questions were considered in the study:

1. What are the community college student services administrators' and instructional administrators' perceptions of the importance of orientations to distance learners?

2. Are there differences in perceptions between student services administrators and instructional administrators concerning the importance of distance learning orientations for student success?
3. What orientations are currently being provided or are the administrators considering providing for their distance learners?
4. What technologies are being used to provide orientations?

Significance

The project is significant because these are issues with which community colleges are struggling as they develop their own distance learning programs (Dirr, 1999). The study and the information gained from this study could be used to help administrators and others involved in planning distance learning courses and programs determine if orientations are needed for successful student outcomes (Dillon, Gunawardena, & Parker, 1992). It is meaningful to look at the perceptions of the two different groups of administrators because it is important for different administrators to hold a common perception about the necessity of providing support services if these resources are going to be made available to distance learners (Granger & Benke, 1998). As referenced earlier, the administrators are the decision makers at community colleges, and their awareness level of the need and their ability to dedicate resources are necessary if these services are going to be provided to distance learners (McKey, 2001). Ultimately these services could help students achieve a higher success rate in their distance programs and courses by better supporting their efforts at distance education.

The study is timely since over half of the distance learning offerings at postsecondary institutions in the western United States, according to a 1999 WICHE survey (Dirr, 1999), have been developed within the last ten years or less. Until very recently, the trend has been for colleges to worry more about course content and less about support services (Carnevale, 2000, Paul, 1988). In distance learning arenas, the success in attracting, retaining, and serving students will hinge more on excellent student support services than on any technology issues (Oaks, 1996). Tait (1995) said, "The management and evaluation of student support, largely influenced by notions of quality assurance, mean that student support has to be examined, documented, and reflected upon" (p. 240). Orientations as a means of learner support in distance learning will expand after an awareness of their importance is seen by community college administrators.

Limitations

The study examined selected distance learning support services at community and technical colleges in the Rocky Mountain Region of the United States. Because of the large variety of support services, this study limited its view to looking at orientations. Furthermore, no effort was made to exclude any form of distance learning that a college might offer. Therefore, various colleges may have offered online courses, telecourses, text-based courses, compressed video courses, audio courses, or utilized a number of other mediums for delivery. The variety of distance education delivery mechanisms was not a consideration when asking the two different groups of administrators at the various

institutions about their learner support services, but it could still be an influence on how the support service might be provided. In addition, the technology itself might be a deterrent to some people's participation, as many adults are phobic about computers in general.

Other limitations included the fact that the colleges selected were all members of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) and represented instructional and student services administrators from the Rocky Mountain region community and technical colleges. Although, the AACC membership includes the majority of the community colleges in this region, there were other colleges, not members of the AACC, which were not surveyed. The surveys were addressed to the Chief Instructional Officer and the Chief Student Services Officer. The colleges themselves determined who actually received the survey in the mailbox. There were no surveys in the study that reflect the instructors', librarians', or others' opinions about the services except for these selected administrators.

In addition, community and technical colleges differ from traditional four-year colleges and universities in their student populations. Community colleges and technical colleges should be viewed without distinction since different states call their colleges which offer the first two years of transfer programs and a variety of technical programs different names. Oftentimes, community and technical colleges attract a population which may need more basic literacy skills before starting traditional college courses. Consequently, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to all of higher education. There may also be unique characteristics about Rocky Mountain region community and

technical colleges as compared to other community and technical colleges in other parts of the United States. In particular, the ruralness or isolated student body of these colleges may be more pronounced in this area of the country. The generalizability of the findings to other populations may be limited.

Definitions of Terms

The following operational definitions were employed for purposes of this study:

Administrators are the management level of the community colleges and their job duties include the management of the institution. In this study, the administrators refer to the primary person responsible for student services or instruction.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) refers to a law which states that colleges must serve disabled students by providing reasonable accommodations to them.

Advising is concerned with students' choice of programs and courses. An advisor typically acts as an advocate on the students' behalf and may help with study strategies and is concerned with the students' need for information (McInnis-Rankin & Brindley, 1986).

Consortia normally consists of two or more distance learning institutions who share in the design and/or delivery of programs (Moore & Kearsley, 1996).

Counseling is concerned with the students' abilities to relate effectively to their environment, make personal decisions, acquire self-understanding, and foster self-directedness (McInnis-Rankin & Brindley, 1986).

Distance education "is planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching and as a result requires special techniques of course design, special instructional techniques, special methods of communication by electronic and other technology, as well as special organizational and administrative arrangements" (Moore & Kearsley, 1996, p. 2).

Academic support services include activities that help students in their study strategies and include such services as tutoring, study sessions, or review sessions (Oaks, 1996; Paul, 1988; Tait, 1995). Any of these services may be offered either in-person, online, or in a variety of other mediums.

Orientation refers to becoming accustomed or familiarized to a situation. In distance learning, orientation often refers to increasing students' familiarity and comfort level with the technology, accessing resources, and program delivery mechanisms (Nelson, 1988).

A portal is a way to gather useful information for a user into one page and usually allows customization for each person (Loone & Lyman, 2000).

Student academic success is defined as completion of a distance education course with a grade of C or better.

Student satisfaction with orientations refers to what degree the service is meeting the student's needs and expectations.

Tutors are subject matter experts for the particular course they help facilitate. They may help organize laboratory sessions, seminars, discussions, and self-help groups.

They give support on course content and may also mark and comment on assignments (McInnis-Rankin & Brindley, 1986).

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided the reader with a brief background on the growth of distance education. It then reviewed the importance of developing support services for distance learners and the role of administrators in the development of those services. The chapter then introduced orientations as a primary area of distance learner support. The chapter provided a statement of the problem, the significance, limitations, and definitions of terms.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The review of the literature for this study focused on reviewing the need for support services for distance learners, the types of learner support services, the role of technology, and administrators' perceptions of the importance of providing support services to distance learners. Furthermore, the efforts of some institutions to develop support services for distance learners was explored, and orientations for distance learners were looked at in more depth.

Distance learning history. Distance learning is not a new phenomenon. In fact, some say it dates back to the passage of the Morrill Act of 1862 which created land-grant colleges. The land-grant colleges had agricultural extension agents whose mission it was to offer classes to farmers in various areas throughout their states (Green, 2001). Other evidence shows that correspondence courses were offered in Boston in 1728 (Kozeracki, 1999). During the twentieth century, radio and television were utilized in the delivery of distance learning, and in fact, enrollments in PBS telecourses had grown to 432,000 students by 2000 (Green, 2001). However, the growth of online courses is a more recent development and has led to a projection that 60 percent of higher education learners will access courses electronically by 2003 (Jones, 2001).

With the increasing numbers of learners accessing distance courses, institutions have a considerable responsibility to help their students cope with the challenges inherent

in distance education (Oaks, 1996; Granger & Benke, 1998). One of the greatest difficulties for institutions is the need to develop and retain student support services (Paul, 1988).

Need for Learner Support Services

Academic and student support services have traditionally been campus-based for campus-based students. Student support systems, according to Tait (1995), "must address the question as for whom they are designed, and what is therefore needed by the learners (p. 240)." Student support services have been regarded as indispensable for on-campus, but only recently seen as important for distance education students (McInnes-Rankin & Brindley, 1986). Some of the reasons to provide support services to students have been to help ease the adjustment to college, assist in their intellectual and personal growth, and to contribute to their academic success (Boschmann, 1995). The support systems provided to a student contribute to the quality of a course as much as the actual learning materials in a course (Oaks, 1996). Researchers, however, have not focused on the interrelationship between learning materials and support systems (Hodgson, 1986).

Support services for distance learners. Some may question if institutions should have to pay any particular attention to support services for distance learners, since the majority of distance education students tend to be older, more diverse, and more autonomous than traditional students (Thompson, 1989). However, others say the success in attracting, retaining, and serving students will hinge more on excellent student support services than on any technology issues (Oaks, 1996). In addition, distance

learners are usually returning learners who are goal oriented versus task-oriented (Granger & Benke, 1998). They lead busy lives but have their eyes on the degree or certificate that will help them qualify for a better job or promotion. Institutions are seeing more students in distance learning programs, and if they want students to succeed, then support services must be provided (Granger & Benke, 1998; Oaks, 1996).

Distance learning barriers. Learners involved in distance education often have a variety of insecurities about their abilities to learn and understand the material, to keep up with the pace of the delivery, access pertinent resources, or get help when they need it (Bergmann & Raleigh, 1998). They worry about the lack of support service or how to access services such as tutoring and technical assistance (Galusha, 1998). While the distance course may include and incorporate the basic subject matter, it does not build in the variety of advice and support that has been part of the role of the face-to-face teacher (Sewart, 1982). Other barriers may include difficulty in accessing library facilities, bookstore services, advising, and student services such as registration functions and financial aid (Cookson, 1995).

Supporting distance learners. When program planners are developing distance learning courses and programs, the support for distance learners should not be overlooked. Distance education students need orientations to support services to help them complete courses on time and to act as a support system when stress becomes a problem (Galusha, 1998). Furthermore, faculty and students must have technology support. Policies and procedures, as well as the technology, needs to be developed to

support student registration, class scheduling, grading, and graduation requirements (Kearsley, 1998).

Processes. With the increase of online courses, courseware vendors often make institutions think the goal is about getting courses on the web (Heager, 2000). The challenge is not about the technology, however; it is about the processes, the student support, and library services. "If you're going to bring students from Saudi Arabia online, you had damn well better be thinking about how to get a book to a student there (p. 47)." The process will include a great deal of rethinking about how the institution can respond to these legitimate demands of distance learners.

For example, institutions should determine if the distance education delivery of a course will be equally able to serve students who need more guidance or more interaction with faculty. The access to the technology may be an issue as well (Parrott, 1995). Part-time adult learners, especially those taking distance courses, "require all the personal support they can get if they are to succeed" (Paul, 1988, p. 51).

Designing systems. A further question might be how to design systems for differing learner needs. Should the support systems be designed for the more independent and autonomous student or for the less independent and autonomous student (Thompson, 1989)? The issue becomes one of helping ensure student success. Support systems developed in recognition of student needs help the distance learners become more competent and self-confident in their learning experiences, as well as their other social interactions and self-evaluation (Rae, 1989). It is important to respond to a variety of student attitudes and skill levels.

Student services have traditionally been rules-oriented with various procedures outlined in numerous publications. However, a transformation in student services may be emerging which is encouraging institutions to develop a learner-oriented service (Kvavik & Handberg, 2000). One way to represent new methods of doing things is to envision a process that has fewer "silo" services, one which is more client-focused and accessible from any computer (Kvavik & Handberg, 2000). The Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications includes this tip among its suggestions for designing web-based student services, "Make services user-oriented and process-driven rather than provider-oriented." (Some tips for designing web-based student services, 2001, p. 9).

Theory of Margin explored. A further indication of the importance of developing or accessing support systems hinges on the completion rates of distance learners; these have been lower than the average completion rates for on-campus students. Institutions do not always know why learners do not complete their courses or programs, but many students drop out before they even start (Paul, 1988). These non-starters have reasons which vary, but might include a misperception on the student's part about what is required to succeed in home study. Then when the course materials arrive or the student accesses them, they may have high levels of anxiety and be frightened away before they ever begin the work. It may relate to Howard McClusky's (1963) Theory of Margin which describes adults' abilities to handle life's responsibilities and problems. The Margin which adults bring with them to a learning environment can be increased by either reducing the Load they handle or by increasing the Power they have to do so. The wider the Margin, the better the adult learner is able to handle emergencies or problems in their

lives. The better and more thoroughly the student is supported, then the greater the Power, and their ability to handle the demands of distance learning may increase. Paul (1988) indicated that course completers had as many personal considerations as non-completers; the difference was in how they coped. Students can be taught improved coping skills. In a recent study, students who attended a mandatory formal orientation where questions and other issues were discussed expressed a greater comfort level with their online developmental math courses than those who had no formal orientations (Perez & Foshay, 2002).

Reducing dropout rates. Institutions must react to students' demands for services if they expect dropout rates to decrease. The lack of student support is often cited as a contributing factor for failure to complete a course (Frankola, 2001). Particularly in online courses, students expect other services to be there in addition to the actual course content (Carnevale, 2000, May). Sally Johnstone, director of the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications, said "When students see a home page on the Internet that lists online courses, they expect other resources to be there too–from library services to counseling to easy course-credit transfer" (Carnevale, 2000, May, p. A55). It is becoming evident that students have the assumption that the support services will be available.

What Institutions are Doing

A survey sponsored by Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (Dirr, 1999) revealed that most institutions have not made adaptations to meet the needs

of distance learners. Furthermore, the two-year schools were more likely than the four-year schools to offer student services only on campus.

Concepts and goals. Athabasca University in Canada has been a leader in supporting distance learning. The "school focuses on two concepts: service to students and appropriate technology" (Feemster, 2000/2001, p. 52). The institution then developed three primary goals for their distance education student body:

- adult students need and want help in setting goals, planning programs, defining objectives and improving learning skills
- the same barriers that keep students from participating in traditional education prevent them from using the services which they need, and
- that these services can be provided at a distance (McInnis-Rankin & Brindley, 1986, p. 67).

British Open University experiences. In an experimental study with British Open University students, one group received frequent on-site tutoring sessions, and the other group did not. Hodgson (1986) described the frequent on-site tutoring as a "strong organizational support system" (p.60). The study suggested a positive effect on people's approach as a whole when the students were provided with the frequent on-site tutoring sessions. It provided an additional incentive to keep up with the learning material. Thompson (1989) also indicated that "the tutoring/instructional support function is arguably the most vital because it is so directly associated with the learning process itself" (p. 47).

Ann Floyd (2000), professor for the British Open University for more than 25 years and a former provost chancellor, said at a recent conference, "Student support services are absolutely critical for the success of the distance education student. It is too easy to think that putting everything on the web will make it happen. You actually need to support the student."

Learner support systems. Dillon, Gunawardena, and Parker (1992) conducted a study that analyzed the learner support system in a state-wide distance education system from the perspective of the distance learner. The study asked students which resources indirectly related to learning were available, such as counseling, advisement, and job placement services. Student feedback not only provided information on resources, but also included the comment that the system and its support services was a best-kept secret because of random marketing efforts. The study concluded that the distance learning opportunity needed to be marketed more effectively to prospective students and those efforts needed to highlight the availability of support services.

Hardy and Boaz (1997) surveyed respondents in 1996 about availability of support services to distance learners. These respondents indicated a need to have textbooks available for sale at the remote site. They also said that an adviser was needed to assist with course selection, course sequencing, and listings of future courses. These particular learners suggested that a handbook for distance students on how to access student services would be appropriate and appreciated.

Changing Areas. The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education survey showed that one area that seems to be changing is in the area of online

registration, course specific advising, and degree audits. These three services seem to be more related to progress in computer programming which enables students to access databases than to the more human aspect of student support (Dirr, 1999).

The University of Central Florida uses the web to deliver courses to part-time learners who are also full-time teachers or trainers (Hudson etal, 1998). All of the support services must come in a similar fashion via the web, which is why they developed a new program, Web PALS (Peer Assisted Learners). More experienced students help the less experienced student with technology questions as well as other survival skills such as time management and organization.

Learner support services needed. Clearly the need for learner support services is evident. Key support services such as tutoring, counseling, advising, providing library support, and others can help students to overcome the difficulties present in home study (Paul, 1988). Institutions have an inherent responsibility "in this provision of educational opportunity to ensure that the 'open' door does not become a 'revolving' one" (p. 50).

If distance learners are to succeed academically, they need support services and information on how to access these services. Developing orientations for distance students is a responsibility of educational institutions; they will want to ensure that more of their students succeed and to move away from the survival-of-the-fittest mentality. This may prove to be a major challenge for institutions.

Types of Distance Learner Student Support Services

The shopping lists. Student support services typically include admissions, registration and records, the administering of entrance or other examinations, providing of information about the institution, advising, counseling, tutoring, study strategies assistance, and library services (McInnis-Rankin & Brindley, 1986). Dillon, Gunawardena, and Parker (1992) indicate that support services may include resources indirectly related to learning such as counseling, advisement, job placement services and student activities. They also believe that textbooks, or at least complete information about the textbooks, should be provided before the first class. Information services may include career or occupational and educational resources. Other experts suggest that student support services include the dispensing of important information, orientations to both the college and to specific courses, advising and program planning sessions, regional seminars and student workshops, effective referral systems, financial aid help, and student advocacy (Paul, 1988). This may also include sessions on time management and study skill strategies.

Informing learners. One of the most important goals of an institution should be that all of the learners know what services and information are available so that they may take advantage of the full offering of services (Paul, 1988). Students need to know the rules and to have the services accessible. This is true for both on-campus students as well as for distance learners. The twenty-first century student is different both demographically and geographically than students from previous generations. These differences affect everything from admission policies to library services, and reaching

these students and providing appropriate services will be a major challenge (Guidelines, 2000).

Individualized services. However, learning at a distance is different from conventional or traditional learning. Sewart (1982) believes that the majority of students cannot succeed in a course through self-instructional materials alone. There is a need for individualized advice, interpretation, support, and mediation capable of meeting students' diverse needs. "The success of a distance education system rests upon a correct balance between the teaching package and the advisory and mediating function" (p. 27).

Interactions with service providers. McInnes-Rankin and Brindley (1986) indicate that a community representative who has been identified as a person willing to discuss information about the institution is helpful. They identified this personal communication with students as a key to helping students succeed and referred to these people as "peer counselors" (p. 65). McInnis-Rankin and Brindley go on to add that student advocacy is important in a distance education setting.

The British Open University provides study centers that provide a place for students to interact academically as well as socially. The study centers also host computer access and sometimes laboratories (Sewart, 1982). The Open University also has a very active tutoring system devised.

Guidelines explained. In the Guidelines for the Evaluation of Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs draft (2000), eight regional accrediting agencies are collaborating on devising necessary components for institutions to follow. One provision states that the institution must provide students with technical support for each

educational technology hardware, software, and delivery system required in a program. The provision goes on to indicate that the support might be a help desk, an email system, an online bulletin board with frequently asked questions (FAQs), or a fax or phone service. Finding ways to meet these guidelines will be challenging for institutions.

Throughout the investigation of various learner support systems, it became evident that helping students access the information they needed to be successful was a common thread. The use of orientations focused on the needs of distance learners emerged as a critical factor in helping students access the information and services they needed to be successful.

Orientations

Orientations vary from institution to institution or consortium. Since distance learners are often returning learners, some institutions are providing a full orientation program to help them adjust to college and the new modes of delivery. These orientations (which often emphasize organization, time management, and study skills) may last an entire semester and be delivered via distance modes, or be intensive weekends on the institution's campus (Granger & Benke, 1998). Regardless of the structure of the orientation, most orientations have one overriding common goal: establishing a comfort level for students (Bergmann & Raleigh, 1998). If the students can become more comfortable with this mode of learning, some contend that student dropout rates will fall from 35 to 50 percent to 15 percent which is much more in line with traditional dropout rates in campus-based courses (McVay Lynch, 2001).

Saba (1999) provides the following advice for those institutions trying to provide online learning:

> Effective orientation is a major component of any online enterprise that hopes to attract new students and keep its current students. Spending time and money on a comprehensive orientation is an investment that will pay off over and over again, as lifelong learners would come back to a friendly online instructional environment to renew their skills and knowledge. Creating a complete and inclusive student orientation, however, requires the support of the central administration, as it may be beyond the budget of a particular department, or even a school or a college. A good orientation package should ultimately incorporate university-wide information about its technology infrastructure, which supports students, faculty, and administrators, as well as access to the library, the campus bookstore, and other similar services. (p. 3)

What to include. Orientation sessions to increase students' familiarity and comfort level with the equipment and technology in their distance course and program can help students' anxiety levels about the technology. Included in these sessions should be an overview of what type of technological difficulties might arise during the term (Nelson, 1988). Regent University in Denver has an online technology and resources orientation which is required of their distance learners, and each module must be completed and passed with a satisfactory grade before the student is allowed access to the online course (Online Orientation, 2000). In addition, students need to know how to participate in discussions and adapt presentations for the medium (Boschmann, 1995). At

Macon State College in Georgia, orientation sessions for distance learners enrolled in Fundamentals of Computer Applications include an overview of the hardware, the online software, course expectations, and the importance of being self-directed, as well as other adult-learning concepts (Cooper, 2001).

Weber State University in Utah developed guidelines for distance learning. One of their guidelines says that all courses should have an orientation which may include an initial face-to-face meeting on campus or detailed instructions on operating in the online environment (WSU, 2000). The Pennsylvania Distance Learning Consortium broadcasts a thirty minute video on study skills each semester aimed at helping students become more effective distance learners (Cochenour, 2000). All distance students in their member colleges are encouraged to view the video.

The University of Florida has developed an orientation with hands-on instruction for its web-based adult learners. Here they get experience with sending attachments, posting on forums, and retrieving assignments, in combination with encouragement and empathy (Hudson etal., 1998).

Orientations to technology. Many colleges are developing orientations which help students feel more comfortable with the technology of the distance course. The Duke University-East Carolina University Partnerships for Training project developed a five-step approach to the problems and challenges that students might encounter. One of the most critical areas identified was to provide a computer skills practice during the orientation classes. In addition, they developed a Computer Skills Assessment Tool

(CSAT) which can help students understand and help teachers incorporate the most needed skills into orientation courses (Short, 2000, Sept).

A project which involved eight community colleges, the League for Innovation in the Community College, and the PLATO Learning systems for developmental studies, cooperated to offer distance learning programs for developmental math (Perez & Foshay, 2002). The majority of the learners were female (68 percent) with an average age of 27. These adult learners reported high levels of comfort and lower levels of anxiety while using the technology including computers and the Internet. Furthermore, those students who attended the formal orientations expressed a "greater ease of initial logon than those who had no formal orientation or a one-to-one orientation session" (p. 22). Providing orientations for students to learn about the technology involved, and how best to work with it, can help students feel much more confident about operating in new distance learning environments.

Accessing resources orientations. The University of Maine provides orientation workshops that include topics such as admission counseling, advising, and career planning. The workshops are hosted at different outreach sites or broadcast through its telecourse system. If students cannot attend the workshops or access the telecourse system, a videotape on the same topics is sent to them (Boschmann, 1995). Other topics to include in orientation sessions are enrollment procedures, classroom locations, test anxiety solutions, library access, and equipment operations (Dillon, Gunawardena, & Parker, 1992).

Personal student characteristics. Learning theory suggests that different learners learn in different ways. One study's purpose was to determine if different approaches to orientations would help individuals classified as intentional learners, performing learners, and conforming learners, improve their learning performances (Martinez, 1999). The experiment included an orientation web-course designed three different ways for differentiated audiences, and the results indicated that taking these human differences into account improved the students' assessment of their own learning performances (Martinez, 1999).

A more common orientation for personal student characteristics is the characteristic checklist seen on many web sites. The Michigan Virtual University includes both a distance education suitability survey and a learning style survey in its orientation course (McVay Lynch, 2001).

General orientation courses. Beyond the introductory orientation workshops, the University of Maine offers a three-credit-hour class entitled Introduction to the College Experience which includes a variety of topics pertinent to beginning college students from time management, study skills, and test-taking strategies, to understanding the technology and information retrieval systems (Boschmann, 1995). The University of Maryland, University College has setup study skills assistance via the telephone. If the student's primary access to the distance course is via print and telephone, then resources should be available in this same format (Granger & Benke, 1998).

The Michigan Virtual University developed an orientation course composed of three modules which analyzed the differences between traditional learning and distance

learning, wherein students examined their reading and writing abilities, practiced using email, identified their learning styles and psychological types, worked on collaborative projects, and emphasized the importance of social processes and interaction with peers (McVay Lynch, 2001). The beliefs behind the course were that any orientation course needs to focus on more than technology, that it needs to help students become aware of adult learning theory; develop more self-awareness of personal suitability; develop strategies to help them adjust to distance learning; provide interaction opportunities between students, instructors, and technology; and allow for reflection time (McVay Lynch, 2001).

Orientations to tutoring. Providing orientations to students on how to access academic course help or tutoring support may prove critical to student success. Athabasca University in Canada has a network of telephone tutors for each course. However, tutors are not always available at the exact time when students want to talk about a course problem. Nonetheless, the telephone tutoring has provided thousands of students help with their course work (Paul, 1988). Every student who enrolls at Athabasca is assigned a tutor. The tutor contacts the student and maintains a regular, ongoing interaction with the students which includes contextualizing the material, providing guidance and motivation, and linking the students to the institution (Feemster, 2000/2001). A phone number with a voice mailbox for individual tutorial support is utilized by colleges such as Empire State College in New York (Granger & Benke, 1998).

Role of tutors. The role of tutors may be extremely important in helping define the success of students in distance learning environments. Online courseware vendors

are touting the availability of their tutoring services. Although little attention has been paid to online tutoring, it is now coming to the forefront. Companies such as e-college, e-education, Harcourt Brace, and Blackboard.com are marketing the availability of online tutoring. In fact, Blackboard has partnered with a company, Smarthinking, to provide academic specific online tutoring.

The Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education survey (Dirr, 1999) revealed that one-third of the institutions provide no intervention strategies for students who needed academic assistance. The study also found that three-fourths had developed no social support networks to help distance learners overcome their sense of isolation.

If the past success of the British Open University tells us anything, it should tell us about the importance of providing tutoring for learner support in distance programs. Providing information on accessing tutoring may be one of the most critical support services for distance learners' success.

Good practices recommendations. A report from the Western Cooperative of Educational Telecommunications, Guide to Developing Online Student Services (2000), indicates that a variety of online orientation tools should be used to provide information to prospective students and newly enrolled students. The report's good practice recommendations include the following (p. 17-18):

- Give a sense of what it is like to be a distance or online learner
- Offer tips for success in an online environment
- Describe or link to all requirements, important policies, cost information, student services, and information on how to get help

- Define the technical knowledge needed and describe the steps to access online courses
- Link to all student services available to distance learners.

Other types of orientations may be about college in general or developing study strategies to further enhance students' ability to succeed. Many colleges are providing a self-assessment test for students to see if they could be successful distance learners. This might include personality traits such as the ability to work independently and be self-motivated (College of DuPage, 2001).

The Guide to Developing Online Student Services (2000) says that institutions are approaching online support for learning in a variety of ways. The report recommends the following good practices (p. 28):

- Provide online tutoring opportunities–the interaction may be via email, chat, or threaded discussion
- Give contact information to enable students to ask questions or seek assistance via the phone or the fax
- Link to external instructional resources and tutoring
- Present tips for study skills and test-taking
- Consider providing an online writing lab

<u>The advantages of orientations.</u> Orientations are not necessarily long in length. Bermann and Raleigh (1998) suggest that using the first half-hour of a distance education course to present an orientation to learners can be very helpful. It help students understand the expectations of the course, feel a part of a learning community, understand

their responsibility to the course and instructor, and understand other classroom rules. A further recommendation was that someone besides the instructor deliver the orientation, which has the added benefit of giving the instructor some breathing space and also introducing a third party into the team concept (Bergmann & Raleigh, 1998). Students should gain experience in operating any special equipment and understand the five-piece puzzle to learner responsibility which includes: patience, persistence, punctuality, presence, and participation (p 63).

Summary of Types of Distance Learner Support Services.

Although there are other numerous types of support services available for distance learners, this overview has provided insight into orientations as critical to the success of distant learners. The experience with distance degree programs at Washington State University led researchers to state, "establishing a quality distance-learning program, the development of student services must be considered equally important to the development of courses. Services for distance students should be established at the same time courses are being developed, not once the courses are ready" (Kendall, Moore, Smith, & Oaks, 2001). As institutions develop support services for distance learners, they need to understand the importance of the services and not cut them when forced to tighten budgets because of fiscal constraints (Paul, 1988).

Utilizing Educational Technology to Deliver Support Services

Technology advances. Advances in technology are primarily responsible for the growth of distant learning opportunities available to students. With that in mind, technology can also be used to expand support services for distance learning students. The University of Maryland University College's assistant dean, Kathleen Burke, indicates the next phase of distance education is not about teaching but about student support (Lucas, 1998). The Colorado Community College On-line allows students to apply, register, receive financial aid, academic advising, order and buy textbooks, and go to the library all on-line (Susman, 1998). Many institutions are developing portals for their distance learners with the main benefit being that of a personalized communication tool which helps develop a sense of community and belonging (Looney & Lyman, 2000). A portal is a way to gather useful information for a user into one page and usually allows customization for each person (Looney & Lyman, 2000).

Various mediums. Northern Virginia Community College uses cable television to air counseling videos and sessions on tips for successful distance education. They are also offering an extensive voice mail system, information kiosks, and homework help videos. Instructors, staff, and tutors are available via day- and evening-call in hours (Boschmann, 1995). Rio Salado Community College in Arizona uses an electronic forum for students to discuss career planning, resume writing, job hunting skills, and personal topics. Counselors moderate and facilitate the sessions (Boschmann, 1995).

Online services. At Chemeketa Community College in Oregon, educational technology advances are allowing online writing and math centers. Distance learners are

also able to avail themselves of online assessment and academic placement tools (Carver & King, 1996). A project called Border Link in California is working with rural high schools in Mexico to help prepare students for college. The project created a virtual meeting place called Link World in which there are nine meeting spaces for students to talk with guidance counselors, tutors, or each other. Students get used to the new virtual meeting place easily because it is modeled after video games (Young, 2000 b).

Webcasting. Coastline Community College in Fountain Valley, California, has set up a system for webcasting online live video so students can virtually meet face-to-face with counselors without having to travel to campus. Students report that it is more personable than a regular phone call, although they are also using email for personal and group counseling. (College gives distance learners . . . ,2000). Coastline is also putting career planning, online course schedules, and registration forms on the Internet.

Technical help lines. As online courses are more widespread, students are demanding the technical help lines for anytime, anywhere learning. The help lines are the most active in the evening, and most colleges are hiring private companies to provide this service or contracting with courseware vendors who provide it as part of their service. (Young, 2000, a).

Campus television channel. Grambling University in Virginia operates an informational electronic bulletin board and a campus news station that distance learners can access. A campus learning channel downlinks pertinent outside programs and also features live TV tutoring sessions, test-taking skills sessions, and other topics (Lowery & Barnes, 1996).

Toll-free telephone number. The Kentucky Commonwealth Virtual University (KCVU) established a call center with toll-free telephone numbers for students and faculty. The number accesses library services, bookstore services, and a help desk. Under development are websites for course registration, academic and career advising, financial aid, and information for international and special needs students (Student services made the difference . . . universities ,2000).

Telecentres. Unisa University in South Africa has taken advantage of technology in order to increase the access of its rural students. In fact, the government has also become involved in sponsoring "telecentres" which feature internet connections to the main campus, access to the library catalog, university and email access to tutors and instructors. These services are provided free to learners, and the quality has been deemed critical to the success of the electronic service delivery (Hartzer, et al., 1998).

Library support. Technology is helping support off-campus library services. Dillon, Gunawardena, and Parker (1992) indicate that libraries should have online searching capabilities supported by a statewide library network. This also allows for interlibrary loans and other services such as advising, counseling, and program information, all supported online. Others agree that off-campus library services should be enhanced by web access which supports full-text retrieval, speedy document delivery, online references and electronic communications (Niemi, Ehrhard, & Neeley, 1998).

Technology only part of solution. A case study of online distance learners revealed student dissatisfaction with the mechanics of a course even though they had been provided with an orientation to the technology. The study's coauthor, Noriko Hara, said

that technology can provide solutions, but it may create problems too–the difficulty is determining how much is human error versus technology problems (Mendels, 1999).

Technology advances may lead to the overall re-engineering of student services. Student-centered customer services combined with integrated data systems and the integration of services, may help the distance learner as well as the on-campus learner (Middleton, 2000). Finding ways to provide services to distance learners may well be equally beneficial to on-campus students.

One recommendation is for institutions to develop a website that describes and offers online, comprehensive student services for all students, not just distance learners. An additional benefit to the students is that it expands services outside of normal business hours (Middleton, 2000).

One approach to the technology question is to utilize the most appropriate technology for the learner support service. Administrators at Athabasca University in Canada think that might include the telephone, fax machines, and most recently email (Feemster, 2000/2001). Athabasca University employees have used audio cassettes for advising and counseling sessions. They have also used the toll-free watts telephone lines for tutoring, advising, and counseling. Broadcast television with talk-back telephone lines have been used for orientation and advising sessions as well (McInnis-Rankin & Brindley, 1986). Students in the MBA program at Athabasca utilize Lotus Notes, a communication tool which allows for collaborative group work and presentations (Feemster, 2000/2001).

Summary of technology. In summary, utilizing various forms of educational technology may allow learner support services to be provided to students in locations far removed from brick and mortar campuses. Publishers and software companies have responded to this demand by helping create online support services ranging from registration and admission forms to chat rooms, access to school newspapers, bookstore and financial aid access (SCT, 2000). As students evaluate which institutions are the best providers for their online courses, the "differentiator for most students looking to take online classes will be the quality of online student services offered by the college." (Hancock, 2001, p 19)

Perceptions of Administrators

College administrators' awareness. College administrators are slowly becoming aware of the importance of providing services to distance learners. "While most community and technical colleges individually offer courses by distance education, they are increasingly challenged to provide the full range of instructional and student support services needed for expanding distance education programs" (Baker & Wolff, 1998, p.27). One study (Dirr, 1999) revealed that most institutions have not yet made adaptations in support services for distance learners. Administrators at Grambling University in Louisiana were led to examine their support services as they were trying to respond to the need to expand distance learning offerings to their isolated populations (1996). To impact the overall distance learner support, administration must be involved to facilitate this change.

Critical responsibility. One of the most critical responsibilities that educational administrators have is that of strategic planning and budgeting which is based on input and data from their constituents. It is the job of administrators to determine whether the resources needed to accomplish the distance learning objectives and goals set by the institution are available and what support services are necessary (Kearsley, 1996). McKey (2001) presents a model for distance learning which has administration as the foundation level and indicates that it is the most important layer since it provides resources to all above it. Administrators' understanding of what services should be offered is a first step to then allocating the dollars and personnel to be able to make it happen. In response to the need for support services, McKey (2001), says that the concept of customer service may be one of the underlying premises to developing successful distance learner support services.

Budgeting considerations. Administrators control the budget, and ultimately they control the resources needed to develop orientations for distance learners. An organization must truly embrace the student as customer concept and seek to improve its services. Even though the administrative level is invisible, the effect administrators have on providing quality student support services is evident and paramount to an institution's efforts to implement the concept of quality customer service for its students (McKey, 2000).

In a list of best practices, two findings emerge that have direct links to administrators' perceptions. One is that the institution needs to view students as customers and consequently become more customer oriented. The other is that in best-

practice institutions, developing electronic student services is a budgeting priority and a critical goal, and, subsequently, integrated into overall strategic planning and budgeting of the institution (Best Practices . . . Services, 1999).

Summary of administrators' perceptions. Administrators' perceptions of the need for orientation services for distance learners is a beginning and critical first step if this support is to be provided for distance learners. The administrative support may not be visible to learners, but it is a critical component to a successful support system for distance learners as evidenced by the project which was undertaken by eight community colleges in the delivery of developmental math courses. Perez and Foshay (2002) indicated, "Although transparent to the learners, we found administrative support cleared the way for successful implementation, program development, and learner access leading to high-quality services and opportunities for learners" (p. 24). McKey (2001) says that the importance of the concept of customer service as applied to student support services may be one of the underlying premises to developing successful distance learner support service, and that administrators may provide the vision to move institutions in that direction.

Chapter Summary

This review of literature showed that providing learner support services in distance education is an issue that deserves and needs careful thought and planning. Paul (1988) said, "I am an advocate of student services because I believe that distance education institutions are doing worse than a mediocre job if they encourage adults to

return to formal education only to leave them to experience yet another failure and hence to do them a greater disservice than would have been the result of not serving them at all" (p. 55).

The provision of support services to distant learners, however, results in resources being shifted from traditional on-campus learners to learners located off-campus. This can represent a costly investment for institutions as they invest in the technology and instructional support staff which may help enable learner support. Administrators that understand the overall impact will understand the value of the investment. In the long run, however, the investment should prove worth it as more and more students take advantage of educational opportunities which have previously been unattainable. Thompson (1989) said, "While some students may be more able to succeed with minimal instructional support, a distance education program that seeks to increase accessibility must provide adequate student support services. Increased accessibility to failure is not victory" (p. 52).

Distance education has been growing, and providing learner support services is proving challenging. Institutions must react to the demand by the students to provide key support services, and administrators' perceptions of the critical nature of the importance will be key to any transformational change in support services. A review of the literature reflects that providing orientations to support services for distant learners can help provide students with the support they need to be successful in their educational endeavors.

Chapter III of this study will introduce the methodology and research used in this study. Chapters IV and V will present the survey data, discussion, recommendations, and conclusions.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter restates the purpose of the study, presents the research methods, defines the sample population, describes the instrument design, and discusses procedures followed for analyzing the data.

The purpose of the study was to investigate community college administrators' perceptions of orientation sessions for distance education classes. The orientations in distance education programs could include sessions on the use of the technology, personal student-characteristics, study techniques and strategies, or other student support services. This study examined the various types of orientations and asked administrators to rate the importance of the orientations.

Population

The target population for this study was instructional and student services administrators at community and technical colleges from the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. This definition included the six states of Wyoming, Utah, Nevada, Colorado, Idaho, and Montana. The names of the technical and community colleges in this area came from the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) website. The surveys were mailed to the Chief Student Services and the Chief Instructional Officer at the institutions. Therefore, each institution received two surveys and the possibility existed that both surveys would be returned to the researcher. Although, a third box was sometimes checked on the survey form which indicated the administrator fell into another

category such as a combined position or the distance learning director. The selection of this population was based, in part, on the results of the 1999 Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications survey which indicated that two-year colleges were more likely to have their distance learning students come to campus to receive support services than were students from four-year institutions (Dirr, 1999). This same survey showed that eighty percent of the respondents from colleges in the western United States offered distance learning courses or programs. The literature review further revealed that the student services component for distance learners has received more attention at the universities and four-year colleges than at the technical and community colleges. Demographic data relating to the type of administrator (student services or instructional), size of the institution, percentage of distance courses being offered, and the length of time the institution had been involved with distance learning was also collected in this study.

The final sample size for this study reflected a population that included 48 different institutions in six states, with a potential of 96 responses (two administrators from each school). The total number of responses was 57 and did include a sufficient number of survey results from both student services administrators and instructional administrators. However, if the other 39 surveys had been returned, it could have changed the results of the survey.

Study Design

A two-page survey was mailed to the selected administrators (Appendix D). It offered them the opportunity to provide the basic information in the form of a checklist as well as to provide further opinions about the orientations in distance learning. A final question on the survey asked if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up telephone discussion. The respondents who indicated they would be willing to participate

in a telephone follow-up were asked to include a telephone number. A small sample of these administrators was randomly selected to have a further conversation about orientations in distance learning (Appendix E).

Different types of survey questions or questionnaires have advantages and limitations. The written questionnaire in this study had mostly closed/forced-choice questions. The advantages of these types of questions include the ease of administering and decoding the data (Gall, Borg, Gall, 1996). The limitation of this type of questionnaire is that it "provides little opportunity for divergent response or for in-depth material from participants (Merriam & Simpson, 1995, p. 163)." To help counteract this disadvantage, a place for comments from the respondents was provided. Respondents were also asked if they would participate in a further telephone follow-up conversation. Another advantage of the survey was that it was mailed and could reach participants over a wide geographic area. Mail surveys are generally considered less intrusive than other kinds of surveys (Survey Design, 2000). A disadvantage of a mail survey is the time involved since it may take several weeks after the initial mailing to ensure the receipt of most of the responses (Survey Design, 2000). A follow-up reminder is usually necessary.

General advantages of mail surveys include a lessening of interviewer bias since all respondents are asked the same questions, a time convenience for the respondents, the collection of uniform data, and the ease of tabulation (Orlich, 1978). The disadvantages of the mailed survey include a difficulty in getting a high return rate. Respondents may not complete the entire instrument or fail to follow instructions, and there is no assurance that the intended respondent will actually complete the instrument (Orlich, 1978).

The Instrument

The final instrument was a two-page survey (Appendix D). This project was descriptive in nature and collected identifying demographic information about the size of the college; the type of administrator (student services or instructional); whether the institution offered courses, certificate programs or entire degrees via distance education; the number and percent of courses being delivered via distance education, and how long the institution had been doing distance education. Administrators were also asked if they would be willing to participate in a short telephone follow-up survey relating to orientations in distance education.

Effective survey instruments should be well planned, avoid bias, include specificity, be manageable and easy to answer, include positive wording, and use logical sequencing (Orlich, 1978). Forced responses and checklists were included where appropriate, and an ordinal Likert scale for assessing opinions was utilized. The Likert scale was a five-point scale ranging from low importance to high importance. The survey instrument was revised many times after various experts critiqued the survey and item design. Two general questions were placed at the front of the survey, questions about the types of orientations were placed in the middle, and the demographic questions were placed at the end. The demographic questions included the size of the institution; category of administrative duties; what types of distance education were offered (courses, certificate programs, degrees, or other); percentage of total courses offered via distance modes; number of total courses offered via distance modes; and the length of time the institution had been involved in distance education. The administrators were asked what types of orientations were currently being provided or considered by the college.

Furthermore, they were asked their opinion on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the most important and 1 being the least important, of how important each type of orientation was to overall student academic success. Orientations questions included technology; accessing materials; library and information resources, course registration, transcripts, or grades; financial aid resources; self-assessment on personal characteristics; study strategies and techniques; etiquette and behavior in the virtual classroom; personal counseling or health issues; information on contacting instructors and advisors; tutoring; and help with ADA disability issues. Additional space was included for the administrators to add other types of orientations if they desired. The last question on the survey asked the respondents if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up telephone survey.

The proposed project was submitted to the Institutional Review Board at the University of Wyoming and permission was granted to proceed with the project. The study was deemed exempt from review since the participants were over 18 years of age and the study was non-experimental (see Appendix G).

A cover letter that explained the nature, purpose, and usefulness of the study was composed. The letter included a cut-off part at the bottom for respondents to fill out if the administrators wanted to receive a summary of the results. In addition, a self-addressed, stamped envelope was enclosed in the mailing. A second mailing was sent to nonrespondents about one month later requesting their cooperation by completing and returning the survey by a deadline date. This second mailing also included a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

The budget for the study was about $300. This included stationery, envelopes, and postage costs, as well as the incentive dollars which were included in the first mailing. A dollar bill was included in each of the original mailings as a tactic to make the letter stand out from other daily correspondence in hopes of increasing the likelihood of participation.

Data Analysis

Descriptive research "often involves nothing more than reporting the characteristics of one sample at one point in time" (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996, p. 376). Descriptive research includes descriptive statistics such as reporting percentages, showing results in tabular form, and reporting results by differing demographics. For the questions in this survey that used a Likert scale, the data included statistics such as mean, mode, and median. Graphs were used to illustrate the percentages of institutions providing the support services, and illustrate demographic differences. The overall decision of "how to best describe a set of data should be made by considering the nature of the data, including the level of measurement, the number of scores, the range of scores, and the amount of information that you want the reader to comprehend" (Harris, 1998, p. 98). The SPSS Base 9 computer program was used for the statistical analysis. For the open ended questions, and telephone followup, the analysis focused on emerging themes or ideas as described in Bogdan & Biklen (1998). This allowed for a qualitative component in the research study.

As the surveys were returned, the results were entered into SPSS software for analysis. Descriptive statistical analyses including numbers, sums, frequencies, means,

modes, and percentages were performed. In addition, a *t* test was run to determine if the observed differences between the mean scores of the two groups of administrators (student services and instructional) on the perceptions of importance of orientation types was statistically significant (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). A content analysis of the open-ended questions and the telephone follow-up surveys was conducted to find common themes as recommended by Bogdan & Biklen (1998).

Data for this study was collected between November, 2001 and March, 2002. The survey instrument was mailed in late November, 2001. A total of 96 surveys were mailed. The initial mailing yielded a 42 percent response rate. A follow-up mailing, sent in December, 2001, yielded an additional 15 percent response. The second group of returned surveys seemed to indicate less involvement with distance education than the first group of returned surveys. The overall return rate, therefore, was 57 percent. This response rate was less than desired since more than 20 percent did not return the surveys. No analysis was made to determine if the nonrespondents were less interested in distance learning orientations than the respondents. As incentives to increase the response rate, included in the first mailing and referenced in the cover letter was a dollar "to enjoy a cup of coffee or soda" and a cutoff response which asked if they wanted summaries of the research results.

The telephone follow-up survey was conducted during February 2002, and the comments were analyzed for common themes. Comments from the mail survey and the telephone survey are provided in Appendices A and F.

Summary

This chapter restates the purpose of the study, presented the research methods, defined the sample population, described the instrument design, and discussed procedures followed for analyzing the data. Chapter IV will report the survey results and analyze the data. Chapter V will present the summary, findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to investigate community college administrators' perceptions of orientation sessions for distance education classes. The orientations in distance education programs could include sessions on the use of the technology, personal student-characteristics, study techniques and strategies, or other student support services. This study examined the various types of orientations and asked administrators to rate the importance of the orientations in terms of student academic success. The information was collected by a mail survey between November 2001 and March 2002. Further information was obtained with a telephone follow-up survey with calls made during the months of February and March, 2002.

A total of 96 surveys were mailed with postage-paid, return envelopes and a cover letter (see Appendix D and Appendix B). The initial mailing yielded a 42 percent response rate. One follow-up mailing followed about one month later with a deadline date included for return. This additional mailing brought the response rate to 59 percent, which equates to a total of 57 surveys which were usable. One additional survey was returned unanswered with a comment that indicated someone else in the institution had answered the survey so they were not completing it. Not all questions were answered fully by all respondents and represented a limitation of the study. Therefore, each question was analyzed with the number of responses which were available for each question.

The responses showed that more instructional administrators returned the survey than student services administrators. Of the 57 responses, 56 indicated their primary area of responsibility; 20 had primary administrative responsibilities in student services, 29 in instructional areas, and 7 indicated they had either a mixture of both or other administrative responsibilities. Table 1 below reflects the distribution. Of the 7 in the other category, 4 of those were the directors of distance education, 1 was an instructional technologist, 1 was a combination of student services and instruction, and 1 was the public relations officer.

Table 1

Returned Surveys

Group	Number	Percent
Student services administrators	20	35.7
Instructional administrators	29	51.8
Combined or other duties	7	12.5
Total responses	56	100

The findings of this study will be reported in the following order:

1) General information about the respondents' institutions and whether the institutions were providing or considering providing orientations for distance education students.

2) Demographic information about the institution relating to size, the distance education offerings, and the length of time of the participation in distance education.

3) Information on the types of orientations being provided or being considered and the perception of the administrators as to the importance of each type of orientation.

4) Information on the types of technology which were used in the delivery of distance education orientations.

5) An analysis of the administrators' perceptions on the satisfaction of the distance learning students with the orientation services which were provided.

6) An analysis of further comments from the questionnaire and the follow-up telephone discussions about orientations for distance learners.

General Information About Respondents' Institutions

Fifty-five of the fifty-seven respondents indicated that their institutions offered distance education classes as part of their for-credit curriculum. Two indicated they did not offer distance education classes. Table 2 shows that 96.5 percent of the respondents indicated that their institutions offered distance education classes.

Table 2

Respondents' Institutions Offering Distance Education Classes

Respondents	Number	Percent
Yes	55	96.5
No	2	3.5
Total responses	57	100

Item number two asked respondents if their institutions were providing or considering providing orientations of any kind for their distance education students. Thirty-seven of the respondents indicated that orientations were being provided, eighteen indicated they were considering providing orientations, and one indicated that they were not providing, nor considering providing, orientations for their distance education students. Table 3 shows the responses to this question.

Table 3

Orientations of Any Kind Being Provided or Being Considered

Response Choice	Number	Percent
Yes	37	66.1
Considering providing	18	32.1
No	1	1.8
Total	56	100

Demographic Information About Respondents' Institutions

The respondents were asked the size of their institutions in annualized FTE, full-time equivalent students. The sizes of the institutions varied from under 1,000 FTE to over 10,001 FTE. Table 4 shows that 38.6 percent of the respondents represented institutions of under 1,000 annualized full-time equivalent students. Only 5.3 percent of the respondents represented institutions of over 10,001 annualized full-time equivalent students. Over 87 percent of all responses indicated they were from institutions of under 5,001 annualized full-time equivalent students.

Table 4

Size of Respondents' Institutions in Annualized Full-time Equivalent Students (FTE)

Size in FTE	Number	Percent
Under 1,000	22	38.6
1,000-2,000	15	26.3
2,001-5,000	13	22.8
5,001-10,000	4	7.0
Over 10,001	3	5.3
Total	57	100

Course Offerings. Several questions asked respondents about the course offerings of their institutions. The first question in this area asked if institutions offered individual courses, certificate programs, entire degrees, or other variations via distance learning

modes. Respondents indicated that most of them, 94.5 percent, offered individual courses. In addition, 27.3 percent indicated their institutions offered certificate programs, and 36.4 percent of their institutions offered degree programs. Two respondents indicated that their institutions offered other types and then wrote in continuing education and Franklin University. This data is reflected in Table 5. A total of 89 response boxes were checked for this question, but the valid "n" is 55 since that was the number of valid responses who indicated they were offering distance education . Therefore, some respondents checked more than one box which would indicate they offered individual courses which were perhaps part of a certificate program or an entire degree.

Table 5

Course and Program Types

Type of distance education offering	Number	Percent
Individual courses	52	94.5
Certificate program(s)	15	27.3
Entire degree(s)	20	36.4
Other	2	3.6
Total (Valid n = 55)	89	na

The next demographic question, survey question 10, asked respondents what percentage of their institutions' total courses were being offered in distance learning modes. Table 6 shows those responses with 61.8 percent of respondents indicating the

percentage was still less than 10 percent, and 38.2 percent reported the courses equaled 10 to 25 percent of the total course offerings. None of the respondents indicated that they offered more than 25 percent of their total courses via distance modes. One respondent indicated on the survey that if an institution offered more than 50 percent of its courses via distance learning, that the institution would not be eligible for federal financial aid programs for its students.

Table 6

Percentage of Respondents' Institutions Total Courses Being Offered

Percent of courses offered as distance education	Number	Percent of respondents
Less than 10 percent	34	61.8
10 to 25 percent	21	38.2
26 to 50 percent	0	0
51 to 75 percent	0	0
More than 75 percent	0	0
Total	55	100

In a follow-up question, survey item 11, respondents were asked to equate this percentage to the number of courses offered per academic term. Fifty-three responses were recorded for this question. The respondents indicated that 22.6 percent of their institutions offered fewer than 10 courses per academic term, 22.6 percent offered 11 to 20 courses, 17.0 percent offered 21 to 30 courses, 13.2 percent offered 31 to 40 courses, 3.8 percent offered 41 to 50 courses and 20.8 percent of the respondents indicated their

institutions offered more than 50 courses per academic term. More than half of the institutions, 62.2 percent, indicated their institutions offered fewer than 30 courses per academic term. The data is depicted in Table 7.

Table7

Number of Courses Offered Per Academic Term

Number of courses	Number	Percent
0 to 10	12	22.6
11 to 20	12	22.6
21 to 30	9	17.0
31 to 40	7	13.2
41 to 50	2	3.8
More than 50	11	20.8
Total	53	100

A final demographic question asked respondents to indicate how long their institution had been involved in distance education. Fifty-five responses were recorded for this question. Responses are shown in Table 8. Most of the respondents, 34.6 percent, indicated they thought their institutions had been involved in distance education for 3-5 years. Overall, 72.8 percent of the respondents thought their institutions had been involved in distance education for 10 or fewer years. It should be noted that in a few cases two administrators from the same institution noted differing numbers of years of involvement. No further analysis was made on these responses since the survey was asking for administrators' perceptions.

Table 8

Length of Time Respondents' Institutions Had Been Involved in Distance Education

Length in Years	Number	Percent
0-2 years	8	14.6
3-5 years	19	34.6
6-10 years	13	23.6
11-15 years	6	10.9
16-20 years	7	12.7
21 or more years	2	3.6
Total	55	100

Types of Orientations Currently Provided or Being Considered and Importance of Type

Thirteen types of orientations were listed on the survey form with an additional two categories which respondents could fill in with other orientation types. The respondents were asked if the orientation type was either currently provided or if it was being considered. Then they were asked to rate their perception of its importance to overall student academic success. Student academic success was defined as the completion of a distance education course with a grade of C or better. A five-point Likert scale was utilized for the importance scale ranging from 1 for low importance to 5 for high importance. Table 9 depicts the results of these questions and contains columns for numbers of respondents indicating that their institutions were providing or considering providing the type of orientation, and the mean of the responses indicating the importance. Table 9 lists the types of orientations in the same order as they appeared on

Table 8

Length of Time Respondents' Institutions Had Been Involved in Distance Education

Length in Years	Number	Percent
0-2 years	8	14.6
3-5 years	19	34.6
6-10 years	13	23.6
11-15 years	6	10.9
16-20 years	7	12.7
21 or more years	2	3.6
Total	55	100

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the survey form. The number of responses vary by category because if respondents were not providing it or considering it, they usually did not rank its importance.

Table 9

Types of Orientations and Administrators' Perceptions of Importance

Orientation Type	Provided	Considering	Total of Considering /Provided	Importance (Mean)*
Technology familiarity	29	19	48	4.35
Accession of course materials	32	16	48	4.34
Utilization of library/electronic resources	28	19	47	4.10
Registration process, transcripts, grades	23	23	46	3.81
Financial aid processes and resources	23	20	43	3.92
Self-assessment for distance learner characteristics	20	21	41	3.87
Study strategies and techniques	13	27	40	3.83
Etiquette and behavior in virtual classroom	15	25	40	3.76
Personal counseling sessions/health concerns	7	27	34	2.71
Contacting instructor	34	11	45	4.78
Contacting advisor	26	16	42	4.27
Accession of tutoring support	17	26	43	4.15
ADA information and support	19	24	43	3.77
Other, please list–Help sessions	1	0	1	4.00
Other, please list–Cultural objectives in courses	1	0	1	5.00
Other, please list–Disability standards	0	1	1	3.00

* Likert scale ranged from 1 (low importance) to 5 (high importance)

Table 10 reflects the same information ordered by the administrators' perceived importance ranking. The other category was eliminated from this table for sorting purposes since each response was only indicated by one respondent. Six of the types of orientations received mean rankings higher than 4, reflecting a high level of perceived importance. The respondents thought the most important type of orientation was contacting the instructor, followed by technology familiarity, accession of course materials, accession of tutoring support, and utilization of library and electronic resources. In addition, six of the types of orientations received mean rankings between 3 and 4: financial aid processes and resources; self-assessment for distance learner characteristics; study strategies and techniques; registration process, transcripts, and grades; ADA information and support, and etiquette and behavior in the virtual classroom. Only one category, personal counseling sessions/health concerns averaged a mean of less than 3. Therefore, all thirteen types of orientations were ranked as at least somewhat important in terms of distance learners' success.

Table 10

Types of Orientations and Administrators' Perceptions of Importance--Ranked by Perceived Importance

Orientation Type	Provided	Considering	Importance (Mean)*
Contacting instructor	34	11	4.78
Technology familiarity	29	19	4.35
Accession of course materials	32	16	4.34
Contacting advisor	26	16	4.27
Accession of tutoring support	17	26	4.15
Utilization of library/electronic resources	28	19	4.10
Financial aid processes and resources	23	20	3.92
Self-assessment for distance learner characteristics	20	21	3.87
Study strategies and techniques	13	27	3.83
Registration process, transcripts, grades	23	23	3.81
ADA information and support	19	24	3.77
Etiquette and behavior in virtual classroom	15	25	3.76
Personal counseling sessions/health concerns	7	27	2.71

* Likert scale ranged from 1 (low importance) to 5 (high importance)

Table 11 reflects the means for the perception of importance by administrator type. This table is in the same order as the list of orientation types appeared on the survey form. Only one type of orientation received an overall ranking of less than three on the importance scale--"personal counseling/health concerns" received a perceived importance ranking of 2.71. All other orientations had means in the threes and fours, reflecting a relatively high level of importance.

Table 11

Perceptions of Importance of Orientations by Administrator Type

Orientation Type	Administrator Type			
	Student Services (Mean)*	Instructional (Mean)*	Other Duties (Mean)*	Overall Importance (Mean)*
Technology familiarity	3.94	4.63	4.17	4.35
Accession of course materials	4.12	4.46	4.33	4.34
Utilization of library/electronic resources	4.36	4.00	4.00	4.10
Registration process, transcripts, grades	4.36	3.50	4.50	3.81
Financial aid processes and resources	4.50	3.60	4.25	3.92
Self-assessment for distance learner characteristics	3.50	4.05	4.50	3.87
Study strategies and techniques	3.64	4.10	4.00	3.83
Etiquette and behavior in virtual classroom	3.14	4.30	3.75	3.76
Personal counseling sessions/health concerns	2.71	2.60	2.75	2.71
Contacting instructor	4.64	4.85	4.50	4.78
Contacting advisor	4.57	4.00	4.50	4.27
Accession of tutoring support	4.29	4.10	4.50	4.15
ADA information and support	3.93	3.50	4.50	3.77

* Likert scale ranged from 1 (low importance) to 5 (high importance)

Table 12 reflects the means for the perception of importance sorted by student services' administrators. The student services administrators considered contacting the instructor, contacting the advisor, and financial aid processes and resources, as their top three in terms of importance to students. Other than contacting the instructor, the two administrators' groups varied in the perceived importance rankings.

Table 12

Perceptions of Importance Sorted by Student Services Administrator

Orientation Type	Student Services Administrators (Mean)*
Contacting instructor	4.64
Contacting advisor	4.57
Financial aid processes and resources	4.50
Utilization of library/electronic resources	4.36
Registration process, transcripts, grades	4.36
Accession of tutoring support	4.29
Accession of course materials	4.12
Technology familiarity	3.94
ADA information and support	3.93
Study strategies and techniques	3.64
Self-assessment for distance learner characteristics	3.50
Etiquette and behavior in virtual classroom	3.14
Personal counseling sessions/health concerns	2.71

* Likert scale ranged from 1 (low importance) to 5 (high importance)

Table 13 reflects the means for the perception of importance by administrator type sorted by instructional administrators. The instructional administrators considered contacting the instructor, technology familiarity, and accession of course materials, as their top three in terms of importance to students.

Table 13

Perceptions of Importance Sorted by Instructional Administrator

Orientation Type	Instructional Administrators (Mean)*
Contacting instructor	4.85
Technology familiarity	4.63
Accession of course materials	4.46
Etiquette and behavior in virtual classroom	4.30
Accession of tutoring support	4.10
Study strategies and techniques	4.10
Self-assessment for distance learner characteristics	4.05
Utilization of library/electronic resources	4.00
Contacting advisor	4.00
Financial aid processes and resources	3.60
Registration process, transcripts, grades	3.50
ADA information and support	3.50
Personal counseling sessions/health concerns	2.60

* Likert scale ranged from 1 (low importance) to 5 (high importance)

Table 14 shows the ordinal rankings by the two administrator types. Other than agreeing on the most important and the least important type of orientation, the other rankings varied widely and ranged from 1 to 13 for most to least important. The

following abbreviations are used in the table: Student Services Administrators (SSA) and Instructional Administrators (IA).

Table 14

Perceptions of Importance by Two Administrator Types--Ordinal Ranks by Means

Orientation Type	Student Services Administrators (Mean)*	Ranking (SSA)	Instructional Administrators (Mean)*	Ranking (IA)
Contacting instructor	4.64	1	4.85	1
Contacting advisor	4.57	2	4.00	9
Financial aid processes and resources	4.50	3	3.60	10
Utilization of library/electronic resources	4.36	4	4.00	8
Registration process, transcripts, grades	4.36	5	3.50	11
Accession of tutoring support	4.29	6	4.10	5
Accession of course materials	4.12	7	4.46	3
Technology familiarity	3.94	8	4.63	2
ADA information and support	3.93	9	3.50	12
Study strategies and techniques	3.64	10	4.10	6
Self-assessment for distance learner characteristics	3.50	11	4.05	7
Etiquette and behavior in virtual classroom	3.14	12	4.30	4
Personal counseling sessions/health concerns	2.71	13	2.60	13

* Likert scale ranged from 1 (low importance) to 5 (high importance)

In order to see if these differences were statistically significant, a *t* test was run on the data comparing the administrators' perceptions of importance for the various orientations to the classifications of duties for the student services administrators and instructional administrators. Table 15 reflects the levels of significance of the various orientations by the student services administrators and instructional administrators.

With a significance level set at .05 for p (statistical power), the *t* test revealed significant differences in ten of the thirteen categories. Although statistically significant, the results could have varied with an increased sample size. The three orientation types which did not show statistical differences were technology familiarity, financial aid processes and resources, and etiquette and behavior in the virtual classroom. This would illustrate, therefore, that the differences in importance rankings vary by the duties of the administrator when classified as either student services or instructional.

It should be noted that although statistically significant in ten of the thirteen categories, the means were still relatively close. For example, the accession of course materials was ranked 4.12 by the student services administrators and 4.46 by the instructional administrators. The difference between the means in this example was only .34; however, the ordinal ranking by student services administrators was 7 and the ordinal ranking by instructional administrators was 3.

For many of the categories the means were different by a wider point spread. For example, self-assessment for distance learner characteristics was ranked 3.50 by student services administrators and 4.05 by the instructional administrators. The difference between the means in this example was .55; the ordinal ranking by student services administrators was 11, and the ordinal ranking by instructional administrators was 7. This example shows statistical significance with a *t* value of .244.

Table 15

Significance of Difference between Student Services & Instructional Officers

Orientation Type	Administrator Type		
	Student Services (Mean)	Instructional (Mean)	Level of Significance *t* value
Technology familiarity	3.94	4.63	.026
Accession of course materials	4.12	4.46	.248*
Utilization of library/electronic resources	4.36	4.00	.140*
Registration process, transcripts, grades	4.36	3.50	.085*
Financial aid processes and resources	4.50	3.60	.038
Self-assessment for distance learner characteristics	3.50	4.05	.244*
Study strategies and techniques	3.64	4.10	.296*
Etiquette and behavior in virtual classroom	3.14	4.30	.003
Personal counseling sessions/health concerns	2.71	2.60	.871*
Contacting instructor	4.64	4.85	.230*
Contacting advisor	4.57	4.00	.174*
Accession of tutoring support	4.29	4.10	.886*
ADA information and support	3.93	3.50	.497*

* Statistically significant at the $p > .05$ level

In addition to researching the administrators perceptions on the importance of the different types of orientations for distance learners, the fourth research question centered on the technologies which were being used to provide orientations. Since technology has been one of the primary reasons for the growth of distance education; technology could also be part of the solution to increasing and providing orientations for distance learners (Granger & Benke, 1998).

Types of Technology/Methods Used in Delivery of Distance Education Orientations

Institutions are using various technologies to deliver distance education orientations. Respondents were asked to check which technologies were in use by their institutions. Six categories were listed with an additional two marked other which respondents could fill in with the type of technology.

Table 16 reflects the responses in this category by order of presentation in the survey. Most institutions (69.1 percent) are utilizing online/web-based or in-person, on-site methods to deliver orientation sessions. These options were followed closely by literature/handouts at 43.6 percent, and interactive TV by 34.5 percent. Other options reflected a few additional methods such as telephone, email, peer tutors, and a drive to the college. One respondent indicated "don't know."

Table 16

Types of Technology/Methods Used to Deliver Distance Learning Orientation Sessions

Technology/Method	Number	Percent
Online/web-based	38	69.1
In person, on site	38	69.1
Literature/handouts	24	43.6
Interactive TV	19	34.5
Videotape	7	12.7
Don't know	1	1.8
Other–telephone	2	3.6
Other–email	1	1.8
Other–microwave two-way line	1	1.8
Other–drive to college	1	1.8
Other–WebCT peer tutor	1	1.8
Other–student to student hire	1	1.8
Total (Valid n = 55)	134	na

Administrators' Perceptions of Satisfaction of the Distance Learning Students

Forty-nine respondents indicated a satisfaction level using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (low) to 5 (high). The mean of the overall group was 3.22 which indicated a medium satisfaction level with their institutions orientation services. Table 17 shows the results by Likert scale category. Most administrators chose a satisfaction level of 3 (38.8 percent) followed by a satisfaction level of 4 (34.7 percent). Only three administrators indicated a high level of satisfaction, and only two administrators indicated a low level of satisfaction with their orientation services.

Table 17

Administrators' Perceptions of Satisfaction Level of Distance Learning Students with Orientation Services

Likert Scale Category	Number	Percent
1 (low satisfaction)	2	4.1
2	8	16.3
3	19	38.8
4	17	34.7
5 (high satisfaction)	3	6.1
Total	49	100

In an analysis breakdown of the administrators' perception of the satisfaction level of the distance learning students by administrator type, Table 18 reveals that as a group, student services administrators perceived a higher level of satisfaction with a mean of 3.38, whereas, instructional administrators were slightly below that with a mean of 3.00. The third group which contained only 6 responses indicates a mean satisfaction level of 3.67.

Table 18

Administrators' Perceptions of Satisfaction Level of Distance Learning Students with Orientation Services by Administrator Type

Administrator Type	Number	Percent	Mean
Student Services	16	33	3.38
Instructional	26	53	3.00
Other	7	14	3.67
Total	49	100	3.21

Analysis of Further Comments from Administrators

Comments on the mailed survey about distance education orientations centered in three primary areas: the benefits to students, the methods and ways of offering orientations, and the awareness level of the administrators. The comments from the mailed survey were used to construct the telephone follow-up questions. Thirty-one respondents indicated they would be interested in participating in a follow-up telephone survey. All 31 telephone numbers were put in a hat, and then 5 were drawn out as the sample to participate in the survey. Although this sample was small, the five respondents cooperated fully and discussed the orientation issues thoroughly and thoughtfully. A copy of the telephone questionnaire is found in Appendix E. The written comments from the mailed survey are found in Appendix A. A complete transcript of the comments from the telephone follow-up survey can be found in Appendix F.

Benefits to Students. Respondents included written comments indicating that orientations were good for retention and necessary for student success. The following are selections from the written comments:

- Orientation are increasingly important and a thorough online orientation will be a huge asset to students as they take distance classes.
- Good retention tool.
- Very necessary, helps for a good start.
- If students don't have an appropriate orientation, they are much more likely to get frustrated with distance learning and drop out.
- Orientations are necessary.
- Orientations help establish needed skills, interpersonal connections, and a positive tone for distance education success

The comments from the telephone surveys were very similar. Administrators indicated that increasing the students' understanding of the expectations of the course was a primary benefit. They also mentioned developing a comfort level with the mechanics and technology of the course and program. One comment in particular said:

- it will reduce the frustrations of both the faculty and the students . . .get them to the content learning and past the technology issues faster--past the initial trepidation stuff.

Ways Orientations are Offered. Several of the respondents indicated that the individual faculty members were taking the primary responsibility for offering any existing orientations for distance learners. A few commented on how the orientations

were being delivered such as by telephone or face-to-face. Selected written responses included the following:

- Individual faculty have specific responsibility to meet their student needs.
- To those you select to participate or go through this [utilizing library resources] on the phone.
- So far, we have been most satisfied with our face-to-face orientations, but of course, these do not work for all students, and we don't require them.
- We hire a student to answer student questions, student to student.
- We just implemented an online orientation for spring 2002. So far, we've received good reviews and should cut down the number of calls.
- All of our orientations should be online.
- We are building a more informational website for next semester.
- Currently determining how to develop and integrate the regular student services orientation held on campus with the distance education orientation.

The comments from the telephone surveys were a bit more in-depth. Several of them commented on the desirability of bringing the student to campus for initial orientations. One of them said, "a face-to-face meeting makes such a difference, makes it more like a real class." At the same time another administrator commented, "it is probably not reasonable to bring everyone to campus . . ." Still another one said, "if students are distant, it [orientations] ought to be online." They went on to describe various ways their institutions are trying to infuse the human touch by setting up chat

rooms, or telephone conversations, and other ways to have students know that it is a "real person running the course."

Awareness Level of Administrators. A few written comments showed that orientations are just now gaining the administrators' awareness and attention. Some indicated that they had been so focused on the training for faculty, they had not paid as much attention to orientations for students. They also commented on the technology skills of distance learners.

- We have been so overwhelmed with orientation and training for the teachers that we have neglected the important aspect of student orientation.
- Now we assume students off-campus will have to master these [technology skills] elsewhere.
- The growth has gone from the "techies" taking the classes to the more general population that (sic) does not have technology skills.
- We have been a first in the community college level to provide this [orientation] service.

The comments about perceptions of administrators from the telephone surveys were enlightening. The were asked to describe their own and other administrators' at their institutions perceptions of developing orientations for distance learners. These comments ranged from "the consensus among the administrators is that orientations need to be done" to "the average academic dean hasn't a clue." The administrators who responded to the survey, however, believed that they knew the importance of developing orientations for distance learners. One person indicated that traditional orientations on campus are

typically a one or two-day effort, and it's done. But she went on to explain that on-campus students by virtue of being on-campus have access to a continuing support system, "distance learners actually represent a special population and need to have a continuous support system."

Another administrator said the majority attitude from the administrators at her college was, "good luck, do it the best way you can." However, the conversations indicated that there were key people who were raising the awareness levels of administrators as to the importance of orientations for distance learners. One person said, "We don't have a system, but the dean of continuing education is trying to get hold of the situation and get our foot in the water."

Benefits for the Institutions. In the telephone survey, administrators were asked if they saw benefits for the institution when their distance learning students participated in orientations. All of the administrators indicated they did; in fact, one said, "Considerably, perhaps more so for the institution than for the students." Many spoke of higher retention rates and fewer dropouts. One commented, "A casual observation is that we lose students because they get lost in the platform--not the actual course content."

Another administrator said, "The biggest benefit for the institution is that we will have our client be happier and more satisfied--that is good for the institution." This indicates a view that is looking at the student as a customer. Along those same lines, the administrators indicated that an orientation will enable the teacher to concentrate more on the course content, and less on the mechanics. One administrator said, "You will truly have fifteen weeks to gestate on the materials instead of spending two weeks on their frustrations."

Types and Importance of Orientations. The follow-up question to the one on the benefits to the institution was about the types of orientations they would see as most important and which ones would they try to develop first. Most of the administrators mentioned the technology, programs, and equipment. One included the comment, "students may be afraid of the technology."

Another theme which emerged with the question was helping students understand what is expected of the distance learners. One said, "the understanding of the expectations of a distance learner, such as the interaction and participation required in the courses . . . may be the more important part." Another commented, "The most important is for the instructors to be involved with their classes and to tell students what to expect."

One administrator who prides himself on still teaching in the classroom said, "I consider the most important day, that first day when I'm detailing the whole routine. So, it's not only important for a first thing, but also often during the course. How do you really make it a quality experience? That's the tricky part of distance learning."

Summary of Written Comments and Follow-up Telephone Surveys. The follow-up telephone surveys added a deeper component to the administrators' perceptions and revealed a thoughtfulness to the whole idea of distance learner orientations. The written comments on the mailed survey were usually short descriptive phrases. However, it was these comments that led to the development of the follow-up telephone survey questions. One administrator indicated that most administrators "may underestimate the speed at which their institution should move. The institutional inertia may be difficult to overcome." They see the benefits for their students and their institutions to engage in distance learning orientations. The reality is that few have started developing the

processes and plans to develop a fully comprehensive orientation program for their distance learners.

Summary

Data for this study were obtained from a total of 96 surveys that were mailed with postage-paid, return envelopes and a cover letter. The initial mailing yielded a 42 percent response rate. One follow-up mailing followed about one month later with a deadline date included for return. This additional mailing brought the response rate to 59 percent, which equated to a total of 57 surveys which were usable. Respondents were asked if they would be willing to participate in a telephone follow-up survey. Of the 31 who indicated they would participate in the telephone follow-up survey, five were drawn randomly and contacted. This chapter presented findings. Chapter V will contain a summary of the research, findings, methodology, and include conclusions and recommendations.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

Chapter V includes a summary and discussion of the research study, methodology, and findings. Conclusions and recommendations will be presented.

Summary

Distance education has grown tremendously in the last several years for a variety of reasons, including the changing technology which is increasing access to higher education opportunities and the constant need for retraining in the job market. The growth of distance education is presenting many challenges to community colleges and other higher educational institutions.

One of these challenges is how to support students who are learning at a distance (Granger & Benke, 1998; Paul, 1988, Oaks, 1996). This need for distant learner support is largely uncharted territory since most of the research in distance learning has been on how to deliver the courses, not support the students. Orientations to distance learning delivery may provide support to the distance learners so that they may become more empowered and successful learners. Orientations for distance learners may help them become more proficient with the technology, reduce their anxiety levels, or provide knowledge on how to access electronic and informational resources (Nelson, 1988; Granger & Benke, 1998; Heller-Ross, 1999).

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of the study was to investigate community college administrators' perceptions of the importance of orientations for distance learners. The orientations in distance education programs might include sessions on the use of the technology, personal student-characteristics, study techniques and strategies, or other learner support services.

The following research questions were considered in the study:

1. What are the community college student services and instructional administrators' perceptions of the importance of orientations to distance learners?
2. Are there differences in perceptions between student services administrators and instructional administrators concerning the importance of distance learning orientations for student success?
3. What orientations are currently being provided or are the administrators considering providing for their distance learners?
4. What technologies are being used to provide orientations?

Methodology

A written survey was developed and sent to instructional and student services administrators at community and technical colleges from the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. As described in chapter 3, 59 percent return rate included 57 usable surveys. In addition to the written survey, a follow-up telephone survey was conducted in order to gain more insight into the thoughts of these administrators.

Results

Most of the respondents' institutions did offer distance education. It should be noted that the response rate to the survey was 59 percent, and if the other surveys had been returned, the percentage of institutions which were offering distance education might have been lower or higher. In addition, the survey asked for administrators' perceptions for which the "accuracy" of responses is not checked. This is a limitation of the design of the study. Since the surveys were sent to two people at each institution, sometimes even those two people did not check the same response boxes in relation to the number of courses or length of time distance education had been offered at their institutions. However, of those respondents from institutions offering distance education, 66.1 percent of the respondents indicated they were providing orientations of some kind to their distant learners. Another 32.1 percent indicated they were considering providing orientations for distance learners. At the same time, many indicated that they were not entirely satisfied with the orientations they were offering. Only one respondent, whose institution was offering distance education, indicated the institution was not providing, nor considering, orientations for the distance education students.

The respondents institutions size varied from under 1000 annualized full-time equivalent (FTE) students to over 10,001 FTEs. However, the majority (87 percent) of the responses came from small institutions of 5000 or fewer students. These smaller institutions may not have extensive resources to invest in orientations for their distance learners.

Most of the institutions offered individual courses (94.5 percent), as opposed to entire degrees (36.4 percent) or certificate programs (27.3 percent). In fact, distance education courses usually totaled less than 10 percent or 10 to 25 percent of the course

offerings at most of the institutions. The total number of courses per institution is still somewhat low, with over 62 percent of the respondents indicating a total of 30 or fewer courses per academic term.

One of the reasons for the low number of total courses may be the relatively short amount of time which the respondents' institutions have been involved in distance education, since over 72 percent indicate a length of time of 10 or fewer years. Therefore, most of the administrators were indicating that the overall experience of delivering distance education courses and supporting the distance students was still in the early phases of development at their institutions. The respondents indicated a further interest in learning more about the importance of supporting distance learners.

Research Questions

The research questions will be discussed in the next section not in the same order as they appeared in chapter one. The questions on importance and perceptions will be covered last.

Research Question # 3. What orientations are currently being provided or are the administrators considering providing for their distance learners?

The questionnaire included thirteen types of orientations which administrators could check as either currently provided or being considered. After the listing of the thirteen orientation types, additional blanks were included for the administrators to write in other types of orientations. No attempt was made on the researcher's part to indicate one orientation type as more extensive or valuable. Indeed, all thirteen orientation types were simply listed in no particular order.

Of the thirteen types of orientations, forty or more of the respondents indicated they were providing or considering twelve of them at their institutions. The only one which received fewer than forty responses was the personal counseling sessions/health concerns with 34 responses. Technology familiarity and accession of course materials were checked by 48 of the 57 administrators. These responses were further enhanced by the qualitative responses from the administrators who spoke most frequently about the importance of orientations to the technology as being the most important type of orientation. Another theme in the oral interviews included the importance of helping the students understand the expectations of the learners and the instructors. Several indicated that interaction and participation were important to student success and satisfaction.

Some of the orientation types could be grouped into a course mechanics category, such as how to work with the technology, how to access materials and resources, or how to contact their instructors or advisors. Still other orientation types were intended to help further empower the student with successful strategies such as orientations on study strategies and techniques, distance learner characteristics, etiquette in the virtual classroom, or accessing the tutoring support. The administrators, if not already providing the orientations, were at least considering most of them and recognizing their importance to student success.

As the administrators review which orientations to develop first, they will need to consider the impact the orientation type might have on the students as far as supporting them and helping them be successful. In addition, some of the orientation types might have a low or minimal budget associated with them, but still be of high importance for the students. Administrators will need to involve others in the planning and decision

phases, but the types of orientations which showed high importance should be considered first.

Research Question # 4. What technologies are being used to provide orientations?

Various types of technology and methods are being used to deliver the distance education orientations in the Rocky Mountain region. Two methods were marked most frequently by the administrators: online/web-based (69.1 percent) and in person/on site (69.1 percent). Other methods which had more than one vote from the administrators were literature handouts (43.6 percent), interactive TV (34.5 percent), videotape (12.7 percent), and other--telephone (3.6 percent).

Chapter two mentioned that the same types of technology which were being used to deliver the courses and programs could be employed to deliver various types of orientations (Granger & Benke, 1998). In fact, that seems to be happening, as these administrators indicated that a high percentage of them were using online orientations and interactive television. Administrators comments mirrored the survey results when they indicated that orientations were being offered in a variety of ways. At the same time, 69 percent indicated they thought it would be best if orientations were offered in face-to-face settings. However, in the oral interviews some commented that online or web orientations would be more feasible if students were truly distant. The administrators mentioned the importance of infusing the human touch into orientations for distance learners.

Perhaps the most important part of the human touch discussion may be the inferred support issue that students need in order to feel like they can succeed in and complete their distance learning courses and programs. Many orientations at the

respondents' institutions are yet to be developed or improved. Since this is the case, the administrators along with others at their institutions, will be developing or considering orientations which will utilize various technology methods while at the same time help resolve the dilemma of helping students gain a comfort level with technology and feel supported. McClusky's (1963) Theory of Margin may take on a renewed meaning as orientations help students gain power to increase their margin and ability to cope. Distance learning orientations will help students feel more comfortable with the processes and technologies which are apparent in distance education.

In addition to developing orientations which will increase students' comfort levels, another important point is that the various technologies may not be affordable to all institutions. Some institutions may be developing courses and the support services only for one or two methods. For example, the interactivity and dialogue which interactive television represents may not be affordable to all institutions. However, those institutions may be developing more online courses and student support services. In that case, those institutions should try to develop online orientations for their distance learners that can also be interactive for their distance students. This study also showed that many (43 percent) of the institutions were using printed literature or handouts as part of their orientations. When planning for distance learning orientations, administrators should not lose sight of the types of distribution methods which are easily available and accessible for all students.

Research Question #1. What are the community college student services and instructional administrators' perceptions of the importance of orientations to distance learners?

The administrators as a whole group ranked six of the thirteen orientation types between four and five on the five-point Likert scale (1equals low importance and 5 equals high importance), which would indicate a high importance level for those items. The highest mean was contacting the instructor, with a mean of 4.78. This was followed by technology familiarity, accession of course materials, contacting the advisor, accession of tutoring support, and utilization of library/electronic resources. These six orientation types seem to have a critical importance, since they may indeed be factors which impact whether the student will even stay in the distance education course as cited by Granger and Benke (1998), Bergmann and Raleigh (1998), and McVay and Lynch (2001). This interpretation would endorse the concept of developing good learner support services advocated by both Paul (1988) and McVay and Lynch (2001). This group of orientation types should receive high priority by administrators as they decide which orientations should be available to their distance learners.

The next six orientation types received mean rankings in the 3-4 range on the five-point Likert scale indicating a still important level but not as critical as the top six. These were financial aid processes and resources, self-assessment for distance learner characteristics, study strategies and techniques, registration processes, ADA information and support, and etiquette and behavior in the virtual classroom. These orientation types help establish a comfort level for students and are in line with the good practices recommendations from the Western Cooperative of Educational Telecommunications, Guide to Developing Online Student Services (2000). Although these six did not receive the highest importance rating from the administrators, they should still be included for possible development since several of these have low budgetary implications. For example, putting study strategies and techniques on a web page or calling the students' attention to existing web sites which have these techniques on them will not be an

expensive orientation to deploy and may greatly increase the students' overall understanding of how to organize and maintain good study strategies.

Only one orientation type, personal counseling sessions/health concerns, received a mean ranking of less than 3 indicating a medium importance level. The implication for this lower ranking would indicate that this orientation type may be less important to develop, or it is available in some other way for students.

Since resources at most colleges are scarce, administrators must make planning and budgeting decisions about which support services for distance learning will be developed. Understanding the importance level rankings of orientation types may help administrators make those decisions. Saba (1999) indicated that creating complete student orientations for distance learners requires the support and commitment of central administration which the student services administrators and instructional administrators in this survey represented. McKey (2001), an advocate for the viewing of students as customers, presented an administrative model which showed the administration as the foundation level with the student as the top layer and the faculty and support staff in the middle. With this concept, administration undergirds and builds the foundation since it has the ability to provide the resources which are needed to develop support for the distance learners. These survey results will help administrators and others as they build a systematic framework to deliver distance learning orientations.

The qualitative component of this study revealed the perceptions of administrators relating to the benefits to students from taking orientations. Those interviewed discussed the increased student retention, the happiness and increased satisfaction level of the students, student success rates increased, and comfort level with the technology and mechanics of the course. They also saw benefits for their institutions which included an increased retention level and the benefit of having instructors concentrate more on the

course content and less on the mechanics and technology of the course. Therefore, since the administrators perceived that developing and improving distance learning orientations would increase students' success and satisfaction levels, then institutions should take these benefits into consideration.

The administrators in the oral interviews indicated that their awareness level of the importance of supporting their distant education students through orientations was increasing. At the same time, the administrators who were interviewed orally thought the other administrators at their institutions were not as aware of the importance of this support, but that key people at their institutions were being instrumental at raising awareness levels. The administrators' perceptions of student satisfaction with the distance learning orientations being offered by their institutions was only average with a ranking of 3.21 on a five-point Likert scale ranged from 1 (low satisfaction) to 5 (high satisfaction). Overall, student services administrators (mean 3.38) thought students were slightly more satisfied with their institutions' orientation efforts than the instructional administrators (mean 3.00). This might have been because more of the student services' functions and orientations, such as registration processes and financial aid processes, have been deployed via distance methods at their colleges. However, no survey data was gathered on this component. If the return rate had been higher, these trends might have been different. However, this survey item revealed an awareness level on behalf of the administrators that they thought students were only partially satisfied with distance learning orientations. In the oral interviews, the administrators indicated that although some orientations were in existence, even those needed to be improved in order to truly reach the objective of helping improve student satisfaction and success rates. Increasing awareness levels is one of the primary first steps to further developing orientations and support systems for distance learning students (Dirr, 1999).

Research Question #2. Are there differences in perceptions between student services administrators and instructional administrators concerning the importance of distance learning orientations for student success?

Differences did exist in the perceptions between student services administrators and instructional administrators. However, it should be noted that all administrators ranked twelve of the thirteen orientation types at the high end of the importance scale as discussed in the previous question. In addition, there was agreement as to the most important and the least important type of orientation. Both student services administrators and instructional administrators ranked contacting the instructor as their most important type of orientation for distance learners and personal counseling/health sessions as the least important type of orientation for distance learners.

However, beyond agreeing on the most important and the least important of the thirteen orientation types, administrators in the two areas ranked the other types of orientations very differently in order of importance (see Table 14). The ordinal rankings of many of the orientations show the differences. For example, although contacting the instructor was ranked highly by both groups of administrators; contacting the advisor was ranked second by student services' administrators, but ranked ninth by the instructional administrators. Another example includes technology familiarity which was ranked eighth by the student services' administrators, but ranked second by instructional administrators. A third example is the etiquette and behavior in the virtual classroom which was ranked twelfth by the student services' administrators, but ranked fourth by instructional administrators. The types of differences may reflect the backgrounds of the administrators which might include their previous education and work experience. Many instructional administrators have been instructors before they became administrators; whereas, many student services administrators started directly in that area.

In order to further explore these differences, a statistical test was run to see if the difference related to their areas of primary duties, student services or instructional (see Table 15). With the significance level set at the $p > .05$ level, the results revealed statistically significant differences in ten of the thirteen orientation types: accession of course materials, utilization of library/electronic resources, registration processes, self-assessment for distance learner characteristics, study strategies and techniques, personal counseling sessions/health concerns, contacting the instructor, contacting the advisor, accession of tutoring support, and ADA information and support.

A closer look at some of these differences reveals that the means were still relatively close in most categories. Although statistically significant, the results could have varied with an increased sample size. Some of the categories revealed wider gaps and higher significance levels. For example, the registration processes showed a mean for instructional administrators of 3.50 with an ordinal ranking of 11, but showed a mean for student services administrators of 4.36 with an ordinal ranking of 5. The level of significance shows a *t* value of .085. One explanation for these differences may very likely be from the administrators' backgrounds in the two different area--student services or instructional. Instructional administrators may be less concerned than student services administrators with what is typically a student services' area function such as registration processes. On a practical level, it is important to remember that these results could serve as indicators to administrators what perceptions their fellow administrators might be bringing to the planning table. If the student services' administrator thinks the orientation to the registration processes should be developed first, then the instructional administrator should try to understand the importance of that from the other administrators' perspective.

These differences are important to consider since many experts agree that the central administration must support and agree about which support services should be

developed (Saba ,1999; McKey, 2001). It is important to build consensus and teamwork among teams of administrators in order to accomplish the objectives and goals of the institution. One of the most critical roles that administrators have is that of strategic planning and budgeting in order to help determine if the resources needed to accomplish distance learning objectives and support services including orientations are sufficient (Kearsley, 1996). The differences in perceived importance indicate a need for administrators to communicate with each other and others at their institutions in order to develop orientations which are beneficial to the students and the institutions.

Future Research and Recommendations

Based upon the research conducted and the literature review, several recommendations will be proposed. The following discussion also proposes further areas to study.

The respondents' answers indicated that most of them were involved with distance education at their institutions. This is consistent with other studies that have shown that almost 90 percent of public two-year higher education institutions were offering distance education (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1998-1999). In addition, two-thirds of the administrators indicated that their institutions were offering orientations of some kind for their distance learners; although the perceived level of student satisfaction for distance orientations was only average. Respondents' comments indicated that their institutions had a long way to go to truly support students with distance learning orientations. This was also an expected finding, since the literature revealed that the importance of supporting students at a distance was barely emerging at most institutions (Granger & Benke, 1998; Dirr, 1999; McKey, 2001).

Since administrators control the budgeting and planning processes at higher education institutions, increasing their awareness level of the importance of orientations will help determine which orientation services are developed and implemented first. There were statistically significant differences between student services and instructional administrators. Understanding administrators' perceptions of the importance of developing orientations for distance learning may be a key to an institution's finding ways for students to succeed in distance learning as well as enabling the institutions to grow their distance learning efforts. This study gathered demographic information which was simply reported by the responding administrator. In addition, although the possibility existed that two surveys could have been returned from each institution, there was no cross-checking to determine if the two administrators from the same institution agreed on the demographic information.

Future Research. This study was one of a few which researched the importance of orientations for distance learners. Further study and research needs to be completed.

A replication of this study is necessary to confirm its findings. This study cannot be generalized beyond the community college administrators (specifically instructional and student services administrators) in the Rocky Mountain states surveyed.

Furthermore, although administrators' perceptions are important, it is also important to gather the ideas of faculty, staff members, and students in order to develop orientations which will meet the needs of distance learners. This data would allow a broader analysis of the critical support services.

In some ways, the qualitative component of this study revealed more about the administrators' perceptions about the importance of orientations than did the numerical data. The opportunity to visit with the administrators provided more insight into their

awareness levels and perceptions of orientations for distance learners. This aspect of the research could be expanded.

A qualitative study focusing on the needs of three or more distance education students over the entire course of their distance program would be enlightening and beneficial. Having the students keep journals of their experiences and then hearing from the student perspective would definitely add to the awareness level of the administrators.

Another student survey suggestion would be to survey the drop-outs of the distance education programs and courses and try to determine the reasons for their lack of retention. This survey might confirm Oaks' (1996) assertion that the success in attracting, retaining, and serving students hinged more on excellent student support services than on any technology issue.

One important component to gather would be the ideas of the people who have been trying to provide orientations for the distance learning students. In many ways, the initial orientation efforts have been provided by the faculty members involved with providing the courses. If a survey were conducted to gather their input, then some of the techniques and topics that have been tried and been successful could be included in a compilation of best practices in distance learning orientations. In fact, an anthology on the topic would be very beneficial to planners in the field.

Finally, a larger population of community colleges throughout the United States should be surveyed in order to provide more generalizable findings. The relatively small colleges in the six Rocky Mountain states may have unique characteristics about them that would disallow the generalizing of the findings.

Overall this study was very timely as administrators are just now becoming aware of the importance of developing orientations and other support services for distance

learners. This study contributed to the field of distance education and may be used as a starting place for administrators and others who will be expanding distance learning programs and orientations at their institutions.

Summary

This chapter provided a summary and discussion of the research study, a review of the findings, implications, conclusions and recommendations. The review of the findings included demographic information about the participating administrators' institutions and their perceptions of the importance of distance learning orientations to their students' success. The chapter was primarily organized around the four original research questions. Several recommendations are offered to further explore the importance of orientations in distance learning.

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APPENDIX A

COMMENTS FROM MAILED SURVEYS

If students don't have an appropriate orientation, they are much more likely to get frustrated with distance learning and drop out. Highly motivated students who learn how to use support services are much more likely to be successful.

Orientations are increasingly important and a thorough online orientation will be a huge asset to students as they take distance classes.

Very important for the first time participant. Good retention tool.

We are not making distance learning orientations a priority, basically because we have few requests for them.

Very necessary, helps for a good start.

We are offering our first on-line classes next semester. Individual faculty have specific responsibility to meet their [student] needs.

We have been so overwhelmed with orientation and training for the teachers that we have neglected the important aspect of student orientation.

Right now, each instructor does their own orientation. We need to standardize the process.

Orientations are very important for the distance learner and are a means for the instructor to communicate information beyond the syllabus.

Now we assume students off-campus will have to master these skills [technology skills] elsewhere. Individual faculty currently do this [accessing resources]. To those who select to participate or go through this [utilizing library resources] on the phone. Orientations help establish needed skills, interpersonal connections, and a positive tone for distance education success. They are important. So far, we have been most satisfied with our face-to-face orientations, but, of course, these do not work for all students, and we don't require them. We are building a more information website for next semester. We hope this will help students acquire the information they need.

We have tutors available for math (remedial) only. We hire a student to answer student questions, student-to-student. [Orientations are] necessary–we have been offering online courses for four years. The growth has gone from the "techies" taking the classes to the more general population that does not have technology skills.

Currently determining how to develop and integrate the regular student services orientation held on campus with the distance ed. orientation.

We have been a first in the community college level to provide this [orientation] service.

With the push to get courses offered–attention paid to orientation has been limited. Individual faculty are currently responsible for it. Our attention has now turned to making orientation more systemic and planned.

We just implemented an online orientation for spring 2002. So far, we've received good reviews and should cut down the number of calls.

BCC does not provide distance learning but is considering it.

We ask them, students, for feedback on orientation each semester.

All of our orientations should be online. We need additional personnel to do this. Financial aid can be dropped if you offer more than 50 percent of your institution's course offerings via distance modes.

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Dee Ludwig
RR 2 Box 240
Torrington, WY 82240
(307) 532-8221
dludwig@ewc.cc.wy.us

November 21, 2001
FIELD(Office)
FIELD(Institution)
FIELD(Mailing)
FIELD(City), FIELD(State) FIELD(Zip)

Dear Colleague:

Is your institution offering distance learning programs or courses? If you're not, are you thinking about it? Have you thought about orientations for your distance learners? Even though distance learning has been around for decades, colleges are now exploring the importance of orientations for their students' success.

Please take a few minutes of your time to respond to the enclosed survey. This survey is part of my doctoral research on support services for distance learners. I am a doctoral student at the University of Wyoming in the Adult Learning Technology Department. One of the reasons I am interested in this topic is that I coordinate distance learning at Eastern Wyoming College in Torrington, Wyoming. Your name is part of a selected sample of administrators at community and technical colleges in the Rocky Mountain region. Although your participation is voluntary, your input is **extremely important** to my study.

By completing and returning the survey, you are giving me permission to use your responses and comments in my data analysis. All responses will be kept confidential and will only be used in aggregate or summary form. The survey has an identification number on it for mailing purposes only. This will allow me to follow up with additional mailings if necessary.

I will be happy to share the **results of findings** with you if you fill out and return the section at the bottom of this letter. Information from this study will help community and technical college administrators develop and plan orientations for their distance learners.

If you have any questions about the survey or its purpose, please contact me either via telephone or e-mail as listed at the top of the letter. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Dee Ludwig
Associate Dean of Instruction
Eastern Wyoming College
Enclosure

PS Enjoy a cup of coffee or a soda with the enclosed dollar while you fill out the enclosed survey.

----------✂----------✂----------

☐ Yes, please send me a summary of your survey results.

Name/Institution	
Mailing Address	
City, State, Zip	

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APPENDIX C--FOLLOW-UP LETTER

Dee Ludwig
RR 2 Box 240
Torrington, WY 82240
(307) 532-8221
dludwig@ewc.cc.wy.us

January 5, 2002

FIELD(Office)
FIELD(Institution)
FIELD(Mailing)
FIELD(City), FIELD(State) FIELD(Zip)

Dear Colleague:

This is a follow-up request for your participation in a survey I sent to you a few weeks ago. I have not yet received your response and would very much like to include your answers in my results.

Please take a few minutes of your time to respond to the enclosed survey and return it to me by January 25th. As I mentioned before, this survey is part of my doctoral research on support services for distance learners. I am a doctoral student at the University of Wyoming in the Adult Learning Technology Department. One of the reasons I am interested in this topic is that I coordinate distance learning at Eastern Wyoming College in Torrington, Wyoming. Your name is part of a selected sample of administrators at community and technical colleges in the Rocky Mountain region. Although your participation is voluntary, your input is **extremely important** to my study.

By completing and returning the survey, you are giving me permission to use your responses and comments in my data analysis. All responses will be kept confidential and will only be used in aggregate or summary form. The survey has an identification number on it for mailing purposes only.

I will be happy to share the **results of findings** with you if you fill out and return the section at the bottom of this letter. Information from this study will help community and technical college administrators develop and plan orientations for their distance learners.

If you have any questions about the survey or its purpose, please contact me either via telephone or e-mail as listed at the top of the letter. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Dee Ludwig
Associate Dean of Instruction
Eastern Wyoming College
Enclosure

----------✂----------✂----------

☐ Yes, please send me a summary of your survey results.

Name/Institution	
Mailing Address	
City, State, Zip	

APPENDIX D--Orientations in Distance Education

The purpose of this research is to investigate community college administrators' perceptions of orientation sessions for distance education classes. The *orientations* in distance education programs may include sessions on the use of the technology, personal student-characteristics, study techniques and strategies, or other student support services. This survey should take less than 10 minutes of your time. Please respond to the items listed below. Your responses will remain **confidential**. Thank you for your help and your time.

1. Does your institution offer distance education classes as part of its for-credit curriculum? (For this study *distance education* is defined as learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching.)

   ☐ Yes ☐ No

Regardless of your answer to the above question, please respond to the following questions if you are currently offering or are considering offering distance education courses.

Orientations

2. Is your institution providing or considering providing orientations of any kind for your distance education students?

   ☐ Yes ☐ Considering Providing ☐ No

3. What types of orientations are currently being provided or are you considering? (Check all that apply.) Following each item checked, please indicate in your opinion on a scale of 1 to 5, (with 1 being low and 5 being high), the importance of this type of orientation to overall student academic success. (For this study *student academic success* is defined as completion of a distance education course with a grade of "C" or better.)

Provided/Considering

☐ ☐ Orientation on becoming familiar with the technology utilized to deliver distance education courses
☐[1] ☐[2] ☐[3] ☐[4] ☐[5]
←Low--------Importance----------High→

☐ ☐ Orientation on accessing materials/resources such as course syllabus, study guides, textbooks, or websites
☐[1] ☐[2] ☐[3] ☐[4] ☐[5]
←Low---------Importance---------High→

☐ ☐ Orientation on utilizing the library and electronic information resources
☐[1] ☐[2] ☐[3] ☐[4] ☐[5]
←Low---------Importance---------High→

Provided/Considering

☐ ☐ Orientation on checking on course registration, transcripts, or grades
☐[1] ☐[2] ☐[3] ☐[4] ☐[5]
←Low---------Importance---------High→

☐ ☐ Information on financial aid processes and resources
☐[1] ☐[2] ☐[3] ☐[4] ☐[5]
←Low---------Importance---------High→

☐ ☐ Self-assessment on personal characteristics, such as self-motivation, for becoming a successful distance learner
☐[1] ☐[2] ☐[3] ☐[4] ☐[5]
←Low--------Importance----------High→

☐ ☐ Orientation on study strategies and techniques
☐[1] ☐[2] ☐[3] ☐[4] ☐[5]
←Low---------Importance---------High→

☐ ☐ Orientation on etiquette and behavior in the virtual classroom
☐[1] ☐[2] ☐[3] ☐[4] ☐[5]
←Low---------Importance---------High→

☐ ☐ Orientation on personal issues such as personal counseling sessions or health concerns
☐[1] ☐[2] ☐[3] ☐[4] ☐[5]
←Low---------Importance---------High→

☐ ☐ Information on contacting your instructor
☐[1] ☐[2] ☐[3] ☐[4] ☐[5]
←Low----------Importance----------High→

☐ ☐ Information on contacting your advisor
☐[1] ☐[2] ☐[3] ☐[4] ☐[5]
←Low----------Importance----------High→

☐ ☐ Orientation on accessing tutoring support
☐[1] ☐[2] ☐[3] ☐[4] ☐[5]
←Low----------Importance----------High→

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Provided/Considering

☐ ☐ Information on and help with ADA (disability) support services for distance education students
☐[1] ☐[2] ☐[3] ☐[4] ☐[5]
←Low----------Importance----------High→

☐ ☐ Other (please list) _____
☐[1] ☐[2] ☐[3] ☐[4] ☐[5]
←Low----------Importance----------High→

☐ ☐ Other (please list) _____
☐[1] ☐[2] ☐[3] ☐[4] ☐[5]
←Low----------Importance----------High→

4. For the orientations sessions you are providing, how are they delivered? (Check all that apply.)
   - ☐ Online/web-based
   - ☐ In person, on site
   - ☐ Literature/handouts
   - ☐ Interactive TV
   - ☐ Videotape
   - ☐ Don't know
   - ☐ Other (please identify) _____
   - ☐ Other (please identify) _____

5. On a scale of 1 to 5, (with 1 being low and 5 being high), how satisfied do you think your distance learning students are with the orientation services being provided? (For this study, *satisfaction* is defined as meeting the student's needs and expectations.)
   ☐[1] ☐[2] ☐[3] ☐[4] ☐[5]
   ←Low----------Satisfaction----------High→

6. Please share your comments about orientations as a learner support service in distance education?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

7. What size is your institution? (In annualized FTE, full-time equivalent students)
   - ☐ Under 1000 FTE
   - ☐ 1000-2000 FTE
   - ☐ 2001-5000 FTE
   - ☐ 5001-10,000 FTE
   - ☐ Over 10,001 FTE

8. In which category would you classify your primary administrative duties?
   - ☐ Student Services
   - ☐ Instruction
   - ☐ Other (please identify) _____

9. Does your institution offer via distance education
   - ☐ Individual Courses
   - ☐ Certificate Program(s)
   - ☐ Entire Degree(s)
   - ☐ Other (please explain) _____

10. What percentage of your institution's total courses are offered via distance modes?
    - ☐ Less than 10 percent
    - ☐ 10 to 25 percent
    - ☐ 26 to 50 percent
    - ☐ 51 to 75 percent
    - ☐ More than 75 percent

11. This percentage means what number of distance education courses are offered per academic term?
    - ☐ 0 to 10
    - ☐ 11 to 20
    - ☐ 21 to 30
    - ☐ 31 to 40
    - ☐ 41 to 50
    - ☐ More than 50

12. How long has your institution been involved in distance education?
    - ☐ 0-2 years
    - ☐ 3-5 years
    - ☐ 6-10 years
    - ☐ 11-15 years
    - ☐ 16-20 years
    - ☐ 21 or more years

13. Would you be willing to participate in a short telephone follow-up survey relating to orientations in distance education?
    ☐ Yes ☐ No

If Yes, please provide a telephone number and time of day when you wish to be contacted.

Phone #:	Time:

Thank you for your help.

Please return this survey in the enclosed stamped envelope to:
Dee Ludwig, RR 2 Box 240,
Torrington, WY 82240

Feel free to attach any additional comments.

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APPENDIX E
TELEPHONE FOLLOW-UP SURVEY SCRIPT

Hello, this is Dee Ludwig from Eastern Wyoming College. Thank you for responding to my recent survey about orientations for distance learning students and administrators' perceptions. Thank you, also, for indicating your willingness to participate in a follow-up telephone survey. Is this a good time to visit about orientations in your distance learning program?

1. What primary benefits do you see for students who participate in orientations for distance learning?

2. Do you see benefits for the institution when these students participate in orientations for distance learning? If so, what are they?

3. In general, what types of orientations would you see as important, and which ones would you try to develop first?

4. What methods and ways of offering orientations do you think would be most desirable for your institution and why? What barriers do you see for your institution in these efforts?

5. How would you describe the administrators' perceptions of developing orientations for distance learners at your institution including your own and others?

6. Do you have anything else you would like to add to the overall topic of orientations for distance learners?

Thank you for taking the time to visit with me, and thank you for participating in my survey. As I told you in my cover letter, this study is part of my doctoral program at the University of Wyoming. I will plan on mailing you a copy of my findings when I finish compiling the results. Thank you again for helping me.

APPENDIX F
FOLLOW-UP TELEPHONE SURVEY RESPONSES

1. What primary benefits do you see for students who participate in orientations for distance learning?

   Understanding some of the expectations before they get into the classroom so they know what to experience. It is a new experience for everybody.

   The students are likely to have a clearer understanding of the expectations of the process, they are less frustrated with the technology and have an increased understanding.

   The biggest one is that it will reduce the frustrations of both the faculty and the students. It will get them to the content learning and past the technology issues faster--past the initial trepidation stuff which students could spend weeks getting over.

   The clearest benefit for students is if it's their first experience in distance learning, they just don't know the mechanics. Having students participate in distance learning without an orientation is just not fair to students. Helping them understand the mechanics is the benefit.

   Probably understanding the technology more clearly and understanding the expectations for communication.

2. Do you see benefits for the institution when these students participate in orientations for distance learning? If so, what are they?

   Definitely, then we have fewer dropouts, and students will understand that distance education is not exactly the same. Most of our students are first-generation students, and they don't understand the college processes anyway, so if you also add distance education into the mix, you have to help them more. It saves the institution some "pain" if they know what services are available and if they understand the processes.

   Considerably, perhaps more so for the institution than for the students. There is a greater retention rate and there is less support service required then for other support aspects. Orientations increase the likelihood of us getting a student back as a continuing student.

An echoing of the first answer, instead of the teacher losing two weeks, you can more honestly say the course is equivalent to an on-site class. You will truly have fifteen weeks to gestate on the materials instead of spending two weeks on their frustrations. You'll end up with at least an equivalent time on the course.

The biggest benefit for the institution is that we will have our client be happier and more satisfied--that is good for the institution.

Absolutely, it can help increase retention. A casual observation is that we lose students because they get lost in the platform--not the actual course content.

3. In general, what types of orientations would you see as important, and which ones would you try to develop first?

One of the first things is using the equipment. We've had this problem with the internet where the students had problems accessing the class or chatroom or list serve or to the overall technology. The students end up behind. The students may be afraid of the technology. This is what I would develop first, then they can concentrate on the class and the content.

Two aspects--one is orientations for the mechanics of the course such as the computers, the programs, the contacts with the instructor to help lower frustrations for the students. Second is the understanding of the expectations of a distance learner, such as the interaction and participation required in the course. This is not always clear to students and may be the more important part.

It will change as time goes by, but right now the technological ones, the basic tools of how to work with the internet and email. We're doing a little survey on students first to find out their comfort level with the technology. Then based on that, we are calling the students and recommending this half-credit course we're going to try.

The most important is for the instructors to be involved with their classes and to tell students what to expect. An orientation for the student from advising and counseling can help student understand what resources are available and will help avoid communication breakdowns.

How to use the technology and how to navigate the course. The understanding of their [the student's] responsibility to their teachers, to other students, and to themselves.

4. What methods and ways of offering orientations do you think would be most desirable for your institution and why? What barriers do you see for your institution in these efforts?

You need to have a facilitator on site and have them come in at a certain time if possible. This also establishes a cohort of people, and they know they can go to someone for help. The barriers include time, people, and money--the same for everything. The time to get people together, to have it be part of a workload for people. We've just started doing the online classes and a face-to-face meeting makes such a difference, makes it more like a real class. You have to find the time and money to work with the students. This might be just one or two meetings, and then with follow up from student support services even on an individual basis. The younger students are computer literate but our older students are not and they definitely need help with the technology.

It is probably not reasonable to bring everyone to campus, but it is the most desirable. Probably you would want to have it available online or in a chatroom with immediate access to the instructor. For barriers, one of the primary areas might be in the student services area. They do not see it [orientations for distance learners] as a role they should play, they do not think they should be handling or providing support for the distance learners. In addition, the institutional funding perspective comes into play since there are other demands for the institution besides the orientations to technology and perhaps accessing tutors. Others may not see the need.

A real person running the course would be the best. When I took one from UCLA, the software company which they were using had us do some trial runs on accessing parts of the course. You need a clear system to identify the students who need it. For barriers, we'll see. Can you get the real person to do it? By making it a one-half credit hour course, we're trying to make the cost as little as possible.

If students are distant, it ought to be online. I would personally like to see at least voice communication between the instructor and student or an hour available where they could just chat. Teachers don't have a chance to get to know the students' real concerns without the voice interaction. It's difficult to communicate the concerns on a keyboard. I do see barriers for the institution in this approach. If the whole idea is that distance learning is flexible and the student is accessing their class from 2 am to 6 am because they're shift workers, then it would be difficult to have this personal interaction in a timely way.

I don't know what you're finding, but we're finding that a lot of our students are not "distant" at all, but students on-campus taking advantage of the flexible time and format. For the institution, the fact that orientations can't take place on-

campus since the students are distant, many of them will have to do an orientation via distance. Most of the orientations and advising for these students is taking place through emails.

5. How would you describe the administrators' perceptions of developing orientations for distance learners at your institution including your own and others?

   I will be teaching a class for teachers and my opinion is that it is very important, but others think that it isn't that important, that it may not be their class. There is also the idea that this new technology is useful but they actually know nothing about it.

   A one-time hit and it's done rather than developing an ongoing program. When we do orientations traditionally, it's a one- or two-day effort, so it's difficult for them to understand the need for ongoing support for distance learners since traditional on-site students have "built-in" support by virtue of being on-campus. Distance learners actually represent a special population and need to have a continuous support program.

   I think it's mixed. If you're talking academic deans [from other institutions], most are pretty removed from online, some administrators are pretty naive. The average academic dean hasn't a clue.

   To be honest, the attitude is "good luck, do it the best way you can." Each instructor probably has their own style. We don't have a system, but the dean of continuing education is trying to get hold of the situation and get our foot in the water.

   The consensus among the administrators is that orientations need to be done. We have a distance learning leadership team, and we think it's very important--and yes, even up to and including the president.

6. Do you have anything else you would like to add to the overall topic of orientations for distance learners?

   The interactivity of the internet classes are here to stay and we are going to have to catch up. I've been to several meetings and conferences and the major universities have entire degrees online--we're already behind. We'd better have some accelerated learning and move faster. I'm sending a couple of teachers to a workshop to help them learn how to develop online courses and programs. We have ITV (interactive television) and often a real problem is trying to get hold of anyone to help on the other end--the technicians. Overall, distance learning is here to stay, and we're behind already.

I think that for most administrators, they are just beginning to understand the role that distance learning will play, but they may underestimate the speed at which their institution should move. The institutional inertia may be difficult to overcome.

I think we've covered it pretty well. The consortium thing [in the state] is a good thing and may help us get where we need to go.

We underestimate how important it is. I still teach classes in the classroom, and I consider the most important day that first day when I'm detailing the whole routine. Also, the time before each test I try to spend time again with the students just looking them in the eye to see if they're really understanding. So, it's not only important for a first thing, but also often during the course. "How do you really make it a quality experience." That's the tricky part of distance learning.

Somewhere in there, we need to have students understand that they are entering a "content-rich" environment. They are enjoying the content at their will--it's completely different. How do we help the students understand that it's their responsibility to get the most from their courses.

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