

Students with disabilities: Their experience and success at Athabasca University

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Biographic Information

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Abstract Preliminary findings of a study examining the experience and success of Athabasca University students with disabilities, over a three-year period, are presented in this session. Student characteristics, including the nature of their disabilities, as well as enrollment and course completion data are reviewed and discussed in terms of services and assistance received.

Key Terms Distance education, disabilities, adaptive/assistive technology, accommodation, support services

Introduction

Distance education provides distinct advantages for many students with disabilities offering access to post-secondary educational opportunities that may not be present at more conventional universities. For example, Paist (1995) notes that flexibility in the location, scheduling, and delivery of distance education programs can provide disabled students with what may be their first real access to higher education. Similarly, Ommerborn (1998) in an extensive review of distance education programs worldwide for students with disabilities notes similar findings, emphasizing that, in addition to improving access, it is equally important to ensure that students with disabilities receive the support they require to ensure success in their studies.

Athabasca University's attention to this population is by no means new. Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, numerous reports were prepared and presentations made regarding the provision of services to students with disabilities (e.g., Gaudette, 1992; Gerofsky, 1997, 1998; Leavens, 1997; Nilsson, 1983; Young & Gaudette, 1997). Following from this work, the Office for Access to Students with Disabilities was established in April 1998.

Currently staffed with a coordinator and student advisor, the Office for Access to Students with Disabilities (ASD) provides students with physical, sensory, learning, emotional, and other disabilities with an equal opportunity to access and succeed in Athabasca University courses and programs. Services are responsive to a wide variety of needs. Students receive information, assessments for assistive technology, assistance and/or referral for funding and services, help with study skills and organizational strategies, extension of course contract dates, alternative methods for writing exams, and a variety of other services. Since its inception, requests for services have been growing. As of April 2002, there were 709 active students, and an additional 100 prospective students, receiving services through the ASD office.

To obtain a greater understanding of students with disabilities at Athabasca University and the services they receive, an exploratory study was conducted to coincide with the first three years of the operation of the ASD office. The aim was to examine the

characteristics of students with disabilities who had enrolled in AU courses between April 1998 and April 2001, to study their enrollment and course completion status, and to determine the nature of the support services they received.

Participants and Data Collection

The sample consisted of students with disabilities who had enrolled in one or more Athabasca University courses, with a start date between April 1, 1998 and April 1, 2001. Students with disabilities were identified in two ways: a) by indicating they had a disability on the General Admissions Form upon applying to the university, or b) by referral or self-referral to ASD after starting their studies.

Enrollment and course completion data were obtained from registration and student records. Data pertaining to type of disability and services were obtained from ASD records.

Preliminary Results -- Student Characteristics, Enrollments and Completion Rates

Between April 1, 1998 and April 1, 2001, a total of 631 students with disabilities were enrolled in a total of 2,506 courses at Athabasca University. Two out of three of these students (65.3%) were female.

As indicated in Table 1, of the students enrolled over this three-year period, nearly half (49.4%) had a physical disability, 19.3% had a learning disability, and 18.4% had a psychological disability. In addition, 25 students with visual impairment (4.0%) and 17 students with a hearing disability (2.7%) were enrolled during this time. (There were also 39 students (6.2%) with an undetermined disability.)

Table 1. Students with disabilities completing and not completing Athabasca University courses (1998-2001)

Type of Disability	Overall (%, n)		0 Courses Completed (%, n)		1+ Courses Completed (%, n)	
	%	n	%	n	%	n
Physical	49.4	312	47.8	129	50.7	183
Learning	19.3	122	19.2	52	19.4	70
Psychological	18.4	116	20.0	54	17.2	62
Visual	4.0	25	4.8	13	3.3	12
Hearing	2.7	17	2.2	6	3.0	11
Undetermined	6.2	39	5.9	16	6.4	23
Total	100.0	631	100.0	270	100.0	361

Of the students enrolled over this three-year period, 42.8% (270 students) did not complete any of the courses in which they were enrolled. Together, this group accounted

for 23% (578) of the course enrollments. The remaining 361 students accounted for a total of 1,926 course enrollments. Nearly 60% of these courses (1,144 courses) were completed. Non-completing students tended to have the kinds of disabilities as those who completed courses.

ASD Services Received

The study also examined the types of services that students received over the three-year period. Based on a review of student files, ASD services were categorized into primary four areas as described below.

1. *Course accommodation* –Extended contract time; alternative formats for course materials (e.g., electronic file of text material, transcript for audio-taped materials).
2. *Exam accommodation* – Additional time for or deferral of examinations, assistance with presenting the questions and recording student’s response (e.g., reader, scribe, large print), environmental changes (e.g., distraction free, relaxation or nutrition break), format change requiring content expertise (e.g., multiple-choice to short answer questions, oral examination).
3. *External support service* –Academic strategist, special content assistance or educational aide (e.g., note taker, interpreter)
4. *Assistive technology* – Assessment of student needs for assistive technology or adaptive aids, arranging funding, procuring equipment, and organizing training.

Table 2 below presents the types of ASD services students obtained, categorized according to whether or not the recipient completed any courses. The most commonly received service was extended contract time, with nearly 70% of students overall receiving this service; 74.2% of students who completed courses received this service. The second most commonly received service was extended examination time or exam deferral, with approximately 55% of students overall receiving this service; 60.1% of students completing courses received this type of service.

Table 2. Services received by students with disabilities at Athabasca University (1998-2001) completing and not completing courses

Type of Service	Overall (n = 631)		0 Courses Completed (n = 270)		1+ Courses Completed (n = 361)	
	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)
■ Contract time	440	69.7	172	63.7	268	74.2
■ Alternative format	8	1.3	3	1.1	5	1.4

Exam Accommodation						
■ Time	350	55.5	133	49.2	217	60.1
■ Communication mode	183	29.0	76	28.1	107	29.6
■ Environment	164	26.0	63	23.3	101	28.0
■ Format	5	0.8	3	1.1	2	0.5
External Support Service						
■ Academic Strategist	20	3.2	10	3.7	10	2.8
■ Educational Aide/Tutor	23	3.6	9	3.3	14	3.9
Assistive Technology						
■ Assessment	56	8.9	25	9.3	31	8.6
■ Arrange funding	55	8.7	24	8.9	31	8.6
■ Procure equipment	56	8.9	25	9.3	31	8.6
■ Training	41	6.5	16	5.9	25	6.9
Total Services received	1401		559		842	

Students received an average of 2.2 types of services through the ASD office. On average, students who completed courses received slightly more services than those who did not complete any courses, 2.3 and 2.1 services respectively.

Conclusion

Preliminary findings of a study examining the experience and success of Athabasca University students with disabilities, over a three-year period, are presented. However, further investigation is required to more fully understand the nature of students with disabilities and their experience with Athabasca University courses and support services.

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