

ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY

FACTORS AFFECTING SUCCESSFUL STUDENT COMPLETION IN A  
CAREER ORIENTED PROGRAM

BY

HEATHER STEWART

A thesis submitted to the

Athabasca University Governing Council in partial fulfillment

Of the requirements for the degree of

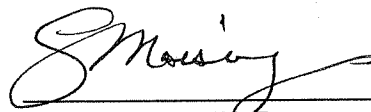
MASTER OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

Athabasca, Alberta


February, 2004

# ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY

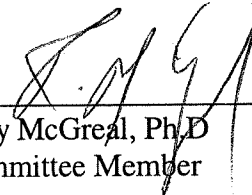
The undersigned certify that they have read and recommend to the Athabasca University Governing Council for acceptance a thesis, **FACTORS AFFECTING SUCCESSFUL STUDENT COMPLETION IN A CAREER ORIENTED PROGRAM** submitted by **HEATHER STEWART** in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of **MASTER OF DISTANCE EDUCATION**.



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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this paper to my late husband, Neil MacRae, who did everything in his power to aid and motivate me through the program. With his continual support throughout the program, the challenge of final completion without his help was a challenge that could only be met in one way – to finish.

## ABSTRACT

Research has been conducted over the past several decades to review conceptual models, assessment instruments and other methods to discover factors and find solutions to high rates of lack of completion in distance education programs. This thesis explores unusually high successful completion rates in a Career Practitioner Certificate Program operated by the Open Learning Agency in British Columbia. The research was conducted to investigate the following problem statement: What are student perceptions of the factors that contribute to successful completion of courses within the OLA Career Practitioner Certificate Program? Five themes were developed that formed a set of questions which served as discussions items during the participant interviews: alignment of the course objectives to career goals; course design and delivery features; personal characteristics and supports; support from instructors and effectiveness of administration systems and processes. Fourteen students were interviewed using in a qualitative study involving exploration and discussion of the five themes. These participants identified student personal characteristics and the most important success factor in their course completion(s). Course content and support from instructors were also identified as important factors. The study concluded that, when combined with program design and course content that had a direct relevance to the students' career goals, personal characteristics and supports appeared to be the most substantive component of the high successful completion rates in this program.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis is dedicated to those people who helped, supported, and encouraged me to continue, and to complete. I acknowledge: Heather Craig for persuading me frequently that continuation was the best option; my sons, Ian and Brendan MacRae, who provided tacit help and respected the often-closed office door; Ken Whittall, who believed in me and gently reminded me that persistence and discipline would lead to completion; and to Dr. Susan Moisey, who in a very short time and with very detailed and supportive feedback, lead me out of confusion through the thesis and defense process.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

A significant body of research over the past several decades has attempted to produce and review conceptual models, assessment instruments, and processes to predict completion and retention in distance education programs. Both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies have been used in attempts to define the characteristics that separate students who complete courses from those who don't. Various definitions of success, completion, and dropout have been used in the research related to student completion. Institutions have struggled, and continue to struggle, to identify reasons why students fail to complete programs. These investigations become increasingly more important as competition among programs increase. Course completion is a hallmark of student and program success. Studies of factors that contribute to course completion and student success, like the one described in this thesis are important for advancing our knowledge of program and course design.

### Purpose of the Study

The Career Practitioner Certificate Program (CPCP) at the Open Learning Agency (OLA) located in Vancouver, British Columbia has experienced unusually high successful student completion rates. An analysis of course completions over the first two years of the program (2000-2001, 2001-2002) revealed that nearly 90% of the students successfully completed the course(s) in which they were registered. In contrast, rates of completion have reached no higher than 67% to 87% in courses and programs at similar institutions, and were in the range of 47% to 66% in the other programs at OLA.

Little information exists to explain why the completion rates for this program are so much higher than other distance education programs and courses at OLA or other institutions. A review of similar occupationally and career oriented programs at other institutions confirmed that the successful completion rates for the CPCP program are much higher than the norm. Consequently, this preliminary information provided an opportunity for further study and research as the unprecedented success rate was deemed worthy of further investigation.

### Context of the Study

An opportunity was identified to explore student perceptions of the factors that promoted and encouraged successful course completion for students registered in the Open Learning Agency's Career Practitioner Certificate Program. As the Director responsible for the design, adaptation, and delivery of this program, there was an opportunity to make changes to courses and the program from these research results.

In 1996, the Open Learning Agency – Southern Interior Skills Centre Operations (OLA – SI) identified the need for a university-level program in career and employment counselling. This need was first identified in response to the needs of OLA's own career and employment counselling staff that required further training and development in this discipline. A research process was completed to assess the larger market need for this program.

Research was designed and conducted informally to identify opportunities for developing this program. The process included analyzing courses and programs offered by other institutions to ascertain if there was a market for an additional career practitioner program. Availability and accessibility for B.C. based career practitioners was assessed,

as well as career practitioners' interests and needs. This was followed by an analysis of employer and industry interest and need. Opportunities for partnership and collaboration in program and course development were explored. The final step was a review of the opportunity for university credit for the program.

As a result of the research, a number of opportunities were identified. Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) had a reputable and credible national program with a large number of courses. HRDC was prepared to give OLA rights to use, develop, and adapt the curriculum free of charge. Initially HRDC continued to provide credit to students completing the courses offered by OLA. However, due to the dynamic nature of learning and education, OLA quickly discovered that there were opportunities to make changes to the structure and assessment of courses. HRDC was reluctant to allow these changes, particularly to the assessment measures, and still provide credit to students.

Through discussions with the Open University division of OLA, the Dean of Arts and Sciences indicated her interest in working with Skills Centre Operations, Southern Interior to provide university credit for the courses being offered. An independent assessment process provided course credit for two courses that had previously been offered in partnership with HRDC. Career and Employment Counselling, (6UL) and Individual Employment Counselling, (3UL) were accepted for upper level credit. After offering these courses for upper level (third year) credit, OLA discovered that there was an appetite, and apparently a market, for more courses in this discipline. In 1999, the OLS - SI group prepared an application to Academic Council for a 34-credit upper level certificate program entitled the Career Practitioner Certificate Program.

OLA worked with practitioners and academics in the field. Specifically, Dr. Norman Amundson and Dr. Bill Borgen at the University of British Columbia (UBC), recognized both nationally and internationally for their work in the field, partnered extensively with OLA and designed, adapted, and delivered several courses. Their association was an important factor in establishing the program's reputation and credibility. In addition, administrators and instructors continually evaluated courses formally and informally, and adapted them based on analysis of evaluation results from students, instructors and program staff.

By the spring of 2002, OLA had developed and delivered the following courses in the program:

- Career and Employment Counselling, CNPS/WTCC300 (6UL);
- Individual Employment Counselling, CNPS/WTCC301 (3UL);
- Building an Active Engagement Counselling Culture, CNPS/WTCC302 (1UL);
- Making Career Sense of Labour Market Information, CNPS/WTCC303 (3UL);
- Exploring Career Crossroads, CNPS 304 (IUL).

In addition, they provided credit for the following courses from other institutions:

- Group Employment Counselling, Douglas College 753A (3 LL)
- Elements of Instruction, Vancouver Community College 102A (3UL)

Two additional courses were still under development.

In 2002, an analysis of student outcomes for the previous two years (2000-2001. 2001-2002) revealed the following:

- 174 total registrations
- 9 withdrawals;

- 165 course completions;

The above resulted in a 94.8% course completion rate. In addition the following data were identified:

- 7 students did not successfully complete;
- 156 successfully completed;

Based on the above, it was determined that 89.7% of students successfully completed the courses in which they had enrolled.

In calculating student completion, a formula was used with total registrations as the numerator, and successful completion as the denominator, with the resulting ratio as the percentage of successful completions. Successful student completions (89.7%) were used as the final measurement, rather than course completions (94.8%). In the CPCP, successful student completions were used instead of course completions, because there was an interest in measuring not only those students who completed, but also those who successfully completed. So while other institutions report course completions, CPCP numbers were representative of a different statistic. In comparing CPCP completion rates with other institutions, it is important to note that most institutions use course completions as the calculation of students who completed, against student enrolled, with completion as the ratio measured.

As noted earlier, completion rates at similar institutions and in similar programs were much lower, ranging from 67% to 87%, and measured a different statistic than those measured in the CPCP program. The higher-than-expected successful student completion rates in the CPCP program suggested that certain program design and delivery elements

may have affected students' abilities to complete courses within the program and that further investigation was warranted.

### Problem Statement

The following problem statement was developed to guide the study: *What are student perceptions of the factors that contribute to successful completion of courses within the OLA Career Practitioner Certificate Program?*

Two goals were identified as outcomes of the research:

- 1) to identify and clarify factors that support students in the successful completion of the courses in which they enrol; and
- 2) to suggest design and delivery factors that might remove barriers to successful student completion.

There are several factors that may have contributed to the unusually high rate of successful completion within the Career Practitioner Certificate Program. Program design may be one factor. The courses within the program were offered in a variety of mixed mode delivery. All courses included some face-to-face component, and were delivered to cohorts of students, seldom larger than 12 to 14 students. These small cohorts allowed for more personalized attention by instructors and administrators.

Program relevancy may be another factor. The program was career related and has been designed and adapted to meet the needs of a specific group of professionals – career practitioners who work in the career and employment counselling sector in British Columbia, Canada. The faculty was drawn from qualified career practitioners who possessed a minimum of a Masters degree in the discipline. The faculty brought a

combination of academic qualifications and relevant and current practice in the sector. Many of the faculty had an extensive academic and publication history.

A review of the literature supported the proposition that there are several factors, including specific personal characteristics commonly possessed by students who successfully complete their courses and programs. For example, Souder (1993) concluded that distance education learners need an extraordinary commitment, a high degree of maturity, and high motivation in order to succeed. Souder's work and that of many other authors informed the development of the problem statement, research topics, and interview questions to investigate the factors that may affect successful student completion.

The literature review suggested an opportunity to add to knowledge in the field by using qualitative research to explore the factors that students rated important in their successful completion of a mixed mode and career oriented program. A considerable body and history of research in this area supported the need for this study, which may further confirm the factors identified in other literature.

### Research Areas

Using a qualitative approach and case study methodology, intensive telephone interviews were conducted to explore student perceptions of the Career Practitioner Certificate Program at the Open Learning Agency, and to ascertain factors that may have prompted student completion (or in some cases withdrawal) from the program. The interview and discussion were focused on the following topics:

- Alignment of the course objectives to career goals
- Course design and delivery features



- Personal characteristics and supports
- Support from instructors
- Effectiveness of administration systems and processes
- Most important factors that contributed to course completion or withdrawal

The topics and questions were derived from the literature review. In defining the research questions, five topic areas were identified from the research. Gatz (1985) suggested that the alignment of the course objectives to career goals was paramount in student completion. Webb (1992) and Williams (1993) also confirmed that learners were motivated by vocational goals. Boshier and Collins (1985) in a cluster analysis of 13,442 respondents found that cognitive interest and goal orientation were factors that motivated successful completion by students. Brown (1986) suggested that distance education students listed three factors as their most important motivation to enrol: to increase educational preparation; to further professional advancement; and to satisfy cognitive interest (p. 188). Boshier et al (1997) confirmed that further professional advancement is an important motivator leading students to complete (p. 188).

The most common themes suggested in the literature were factors related to course design and delivery features. There are references to these factors in the literature. There references are primarily related to ease of use and understanding of course materials, and access to material using more advanced distance education methods such as Internet-based discussion. Roblyer (1999) confirmed that student control over pacing and timing was important. In a 1999 case study, Bartolic, Silvia, and Bates (1999) suggested that distance students preferred a mix of technologies and delivery methods. Boshier et al

(1997) investigated the design and accessibility of web in a study of 127 web courses in several countries. They suggested that,

the best web courses are attractive and accessible, and involve high levels of interaction that go well beyond the conversational superficialities of e-mail and chat rooms. From an adult education perspective, it is not acceptable to use the web to emulate the worst of face-to-face courses where power relations are unproblematised and learners constructed as passive recipients of information (p. 347).

The variety of factors identified by these authors confirmed the importance of asking study participants for their opinion of course design and delivery features in relation to successful completion.

Toebe (1982) determined factors that contributed to student participation and course completion. He suggested that personal satisfaction, the need to update knowledge, course faculty who encouraged participants, and self-motivation, and good study habits were important personal characteristics for students to possess. Woodley and Partlett (1983), in a comprehensive literature review, confirmed that specific student personal characteristics and support, support from instructors, and effective administrative systems and processes were vital. Coldeway (1991) suggested that motivation was the key to student completion and that many students who do not complete exhibited weak motivation. Cavaliere (as cited in Miriam, 1993) noted that “the ability to be self-directed in one’s learning, that is, to be primarily responsible and in control of what, where and how one learns, is critical to survival and prosperity in a world of continuous personal, community and societal change.” (p.32). “Academic resourcefulness consistently best

predicted higher final grade,” was the conclusion of a study by Kennett (1994). Steiner and Sullivan (1984) confirmed that, in courses related to organic chemistry, the best predictors of success were a positive attitude toward the study of chemistry and a positive perception of the field.

As the literature was reviewed, the most compelling theme became the constant reference to the need for students to possess several personal characteristics combined with exemplary support from family, friends and work colleagues. Peters (1992), using Tinto’s model, suggested among other factors, that lack of flexibility and lack of commitment were two possible predictors of failure. Souder (1993) suggested that distance education learners needed extraordinary commitment, a high degree of maturity, and high motivation to successfully complete courses. Toebe (1982) confirmed these themes with his suggestions that distance students were successful for reasons such as: personal satisfaction; course faculty who encouraged participation, self-motivation, and good study habits. Cavaliere (as cited in Miriam, 1993) capsulated these comments by saying, “the ability to be self-directed in one’s learning, that is, to be primarily responsible and in control of what, where and how one learns, is critical to survival and prosperity in a world of continuous personal, community and societal change.” (p.32). Kennett (1994) studied the importance of learned resourcefulness and self-management strategies so that students could deal with “unpleasant emotional experiences, breaking an undesirable habit, handling limited funds and carrying out a boring but necessary job” (p. 295). She further suggested from her research that academic resourcefulness was a reliable predictor of higher final grades. In these contexts, the personal characteristics of successful distance education students began to take shape.

Support from the instructor was addressed throughout the literature, and appeared in references to both distance education and classroom-based delivery. Johnson et al (2000) reviewed student success rates related to student interaction; student and instructor interaction, and instructor support, and attributed high success rates to the presence of each of these factors. Immediate feedback and assignment turnaround from instructors was identified in many studies. Particularly prolific writers like Rekkedahl (1983) used scientific research methods to demonstrate the importance of immediate feedback if students were to be successful. Arun (1992) stated that two-way interaction, quick turnaround time on marks and assignments, and a reduction in exam orientation were all-important factors in course design and delivery. Biner (1995) confirmed that promptness of having test and papers marked and returned were very important to students. “A course facilitator who encouraged participation through interaction with learners was a stimulus for personal motivation,” was a conclusion of Toebe et al (1982). The experience in the OLA program provided substantive reinforcement regarding importance of these factors for distance students.

Coldeway (1991) discussed the lack of tutor contact, or having the majority of tutor contact student-initiated as a significant factor in student non-completion. Much of the literature discussed student need for interaction and support from instructors. Ghosh (1992) used Bloom’s model of mastery learning to confirm findings of other researchers by stating that institutions needed to ensure frequent assessment of student attainment as well as feedback and tests for each instructional unit. The continued focus on extensive and intensive student and instructor interaction is reiterated in research of other authors, such as Landstrom (1984), who suggested that tutor support was important (p. 292), and

Kolb (1984) who referred to an experiential learning cycle that confirmed methods and processes that promoted learning for adults. These papers highlighted the need for instructors to understand and adapt their facilitation styles to meet the needs of diverse groups of adult learners.

The effectiveness of administration systems and processes was addressed in the literature, but tended to have received substantially less attention than other factors. Woodley and Partlett (1983) addressed intuitional responsibility for managing systems and processes effectively. Many writers researched and reviewed systems of student admission and support, and suggested many options for providing better systems and support to students. Alexander and Pegler (1995) stated that,

over time we have noticed increasing convergence between distance learning and conventional face-to-face delivery, and distance learning has frequently set standards for campus-based courses to follow. Our procedures for quality assurance, including comprehensive documentation, systemic evaluation and feedback, visibility, predictability and preparedness are being applied increasingly to campus-based teaching. Overcoming the innate conservatism of both students and teachers is perhaps the greatest challenge facing any teaching institution which seeks to introduce distance learning. (p. 213)

Several authors suggested that institutions would increase their students' success rates if they became more learner focused. Caffarella (1993) said "the process of learning, which is centred on learner need, is seen as more important than the content, therefore, when educators are involved in the learning process, their most important role is to act as facilitators or guides, as opposed to content experts" (p. 26). In this statement, Caffarella

(1993) confirms a common theme in the literature. Beyond the requirements of effective administrative systems and process, institutions could provide benefit to their students by encouraging faculty and administrators to adopt a humanistic and facilitative approach to student interactions. This approach should clearly demonstrate not only an understanding of, but also an ability to model an adult learning centred approach to learning. Cavaliere (as cited in Miriam, 1993) further stated that distance education students need to have access to institutional supports that do the following: maintain and increase motivation; promote effective study habits; institute a feeling of belonging; provide guidance; and permit ready access to resources and answers to administrative enquiries. Olcott (1996) advocates, “higher education institutions must learn to function more like a business and provide responsive, timely and cost effective programs in the home, the workplace and the traditional classroom.” (p.104). These elements prompted the development of a series of questions related to administrative systems and processes.

### Definitions

The following terms are used in this study:

- **Open Learning** refers to studies in a formal or informal environment where a student has the freedom of choice and opportunity to determine the goals of his or her learning, to resolve the questions pertaining to the time and place of study as well as those of scheduling (Keegan, 1986a, 1986b)
- **Distance Education** is a method of teaching and learning where all or part of the process may take place without direct face-to-face interaction between student and teacher and student and student. Distance education implies a physical

separation of teacher and learner, and may include such communication methods as Internet, phone, video, mail, or print.

- **Successful student completion** is operationally defined as the successful completion of the course or program. Completion means that students have completed a course or program, but may not have received a passing grade. Successful completion includes completion of all course or program components with a passing grade.
- **A Career Practitioner** works with individuals seeking to make a career transition. Career Practitioners use a variety of methods and supports to facilitate the career transition process with their clients. They may: provide career and employment counselling, support clients in research skills, develop employment action plans, promote labour market research, and help their clients achieve the agreed upon career goal.
- **Career Counselling** is facilitating a process whereby an individual receives support in defining a career goal, and preparing a plan to reach that goal. Career counselling helps a client look at facets of their career, including, training or education, professional development, and successive achievement of a career goal through planning a series of jobs to reach a career goal.
- **Employment Counselling** is a more defined process than career counselling, in that the employment counselling process is focussed on a more immediate and short-term processes of helping a client gain employment.

- **Professional Development** is any training or education, formal or informal that helps an individual gain new skills and abilities related to their career and working profession.
- **Training** is the development of skills and abilities related to particular functions.
- **Education** is the development of skills and knowledge that may apply to personal or professional goals. Education is a term that applies to gaining knowledge and wisdom related to all aspects of individual's life.
- **Online Communication** is the exchange of information using the Internet and on-line mechanisms such as on-line discussions groups and interaction using email. The communication may be synchronous or asynchronous.
- **Labour Market Information** is information related to the supply and demand in facets of the labour exchange function. Typically it involves gathering information about employment trends and opportunities, researching data about occupational and sector trends, and matching and relating those trends to work opportunities. It includes analyzing micro and macro-economic data to assess the occupations and sectors that may provide increasing or declining work opportunities, and then further assessing the skills, knowledge, experience and education that individuals need to gain in order to gain work in high demand occupations or maintain work in lower demand occupations.
- **Communications technologies** are a range of technologies that are used to assist in facilitating discussion between two or more individuals. These technologies include the following: video and audio conference; Internet based discussion



groups; video production and disbursement, and paper-based correspondence methods.

- **Mixed Mode Delivery** refers to a course or program that uses more than one method of interaction. Typically mixed mode delivery includes face-to-face delivery, combined with another distance based delivery tool such as the Internet.
- **Open Admissions** is an institutional admissions system that encourages students to enrol in programs by combining education and experience to meet entrance requirements. This system encourages participation from learners who may not have sufficient formal academic requirements to meet the usual program prerequisites. For example, many universities are now accepting students for Masters level programs, who do not possess undergraduate degree, but rather have a combination of education and experience equivalent to an undergraduate degree.

### Assumptions

The reasons for successful student completion or withdrawal are complex and involve many variables. It was assumed that participants in this study had overcome personal and professional barriers to enrol in these courses, and had chosen to participate in distance education because it presented a viable education option for them. It was also assumed that these students would be able, given the guidance of an interview questionnaire, to provide reasoned responses to the questions, suggesting factors promoting successful completion.

## Delimitations

Qualitative research provides a particular set of views from a small sample. The research involved intensive interviews with 14 students who had enrolled in CPCP courses. As much as possible, students were selected to reflect the demographic characteristics of the student population. Nevertheless, the results are not generalizable to other populations and institutions.

## Organization of the Thesis

This thesis has been constructed in five chapters. The Introduction defines the problem of analyzing factors in order to learn more about the successful completion rates in the Career Practitioner Certificate Program. This chapter provides an introduction to the field, and confirms the topics that were identified in the literature and informed the development of themes for the study.

Chapter 2, Review of the Literature, provides a more complete review of the literature about student completion rates in distance education programs. In this chapter, research about the design of methods to predict student dropout and success are discussed. The literature is examined as it related to the five themes identified as worthy of further research about the CPCP student population rates of successful completion.

Chapter 3, Methodology, provides a detailed outline of the steps in the research design. Participant population and sample is described, and research procedures and data collection techniques used in this qualitative research are presented. The chapter concludes with a review of the data analysis process.

Chapter 4, Results and Discussion, presents the results of the qualitative research process. This chapter reviews the results drawn from the 14 study participants in relation

to each of the questions discussed in the participant interviews. An analysis of the demographics of the study participants is also included.

The final chapter, Conclusion and Recommendations, concludes that the common themes identified in this study may be useful in predicting successful student completion. A set of recommendations is presented that may be of interest to institutions seeking to improve student successful completion.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

#### Introduction

A review was completed of models, processes, and systems that had been identified to predict and ameliorate dropout and non-completion rates in distance education. In the research process, there was considerable commonality in the attributes of students who successfully completed courses. Identifying these commonalities formed the basis of this study's questions.

In order to consider the research related to courses and programs in British Columbia, a number of papers that related to Open Learning Agency and the Open University Consortium courses were reviewed. The research completed by Open Learning Agency was compared against the backdrop of success and completion in distance education courses and programs at other institutions.

The general research and conceptual modelling looked at many aspects and variables affecting student completion rates. The literature review included many different kinds of research types and methods.

Table 1 below provides a summary of the kinds of research and study that were evident in the literature search completed:

Table 1. Summary of Research Reviewed

<b>Type</b>	<b>Author</b>
Research and Experimental Study	Annand (1997), Bartolic (1999), Boshier & Collins (1985), Boshier et al (1997), Rekkedal (1985), Toebe (1982), Von Prummer (1990), Webb (1992), Williams (1993)
Developing, testing or adapting models	Biner (1995), Breugh (1981), Brown (1986), Cleveland-Innes (1994), Coldeway (1986), Harrison et al (1991), Kember ((1994), Kennett (1994), Oman (1986), Peters (1992), Powles & Anwyl (1987), Purnell et al (1996), Ross & Powell (1990), Steiner & Sullivan (1984), Trice (1987)
Statistical analysis	Black et al (1994), Eliesen (1998)
Comparing similar distance and f2f courses	Alexander & Pegler (1995), Johnson (2001), Souder (1993)
Review of research via lit search and recommendations	Gatz (1985), Munro (1989), Olcott (1996), Saba (2000), Verreck (2000), Woodley & Partlett (1983)
Development of educational theory, or questioning lack thereof	Anderson & Garrison (1993), Miriam (1993), Pantzar (1995), Poole (1987)
Qualitative research design and methodology	Burge (1990), Burge (1990), Perraton (2000)

As the literature review progressed, a series of themes became apparent, which typified the reasons identified for successful student completion. Five themes were identified:

- Alignment of the course objectives to career goals
- Course design and delivery features

- Personal characteristics and supports
- Support from instructors
- Effectiveness of administration systems and processes

These themes are explored later in this chapter.

### Success Rates in Distance Education Programs

Additional searches of the literature confirmed that the success rates for the CPCP were higher than might be expected, especially as related to OLA programs. The seven research papers prepared by OLA were primarily statistical analyses of student success and completions. In March 1998, Eliesen (1998) compared Open University and Open College course completion rates with that of other institutions offering face-to-face programs. She concluded that OU/OC completion rates were consistently lower than those in several institutions offering classroom-based delivery (Table 2.).

Table 2. Completion rates of Selected Colleges in British Columbia (1998)

<b>Institution</b>	<b>Completion rate for General Arts and Science: Lower Division</b>	<b>Completion rate for Applied and Professional 1 – 3 yr Programs</b>
OU/OC	47.5%	66.7%
Emily Carr		88.8%
Camosun	79.0%	
Capilano	85.0%	
CNC	70.9%	
College of the Rockies	86.0%	
Douglas	78.0%	
Okanagan University College		86.85
Kwantlen		84.8%
Langara		87.0%
Malaspina		86.8%
NVIT		84.0%

Eliesen (1998) concluded that in all disciplines, OU/OC completion rates were either the lowest or second lowest in the University/College system in British Columbia. This finding reinforced the purpose of this study's research, in that the completion rates for the CPCP were very high. While OLA's overall completion rates were low, this particular distance education program demonstrated a successful completion rate of 90%.

In the *Consortium Student Survey, Final Report*, the OLA Research Office conducted a survey of 340 Canadian students in Consortium courses, and asked the following four basic questions:

1. Who takes consortium courses?
2. What are their academic goals?
3. Why do they take courses at a distance?
4. Why do they take courses through the consortium?

The results of these analyses were consistent with other research. The majority of distance students were women (77%), 25 or older (79%), with work (81%) and/or family responsibilities (54%), with some post-secondary education (85%). Their academic goals were to graduate within 5 years (67%), or upgrading, acquiring specific skills or personal interest reasons (24%). 52% said they chose distance education because it was convenient. 48% said they enrolled in Consortium courses through OLA because it was easier than applying directly to other Consortium institutions.

The report also included detailed case studies profiling several distance education students.

In 1998, Eliesen completed a study entitled *A Comparison of Course Completion Rates: the Open University and Open College, Athabasca University, and the OU Consortium*. This research again demonstrated that OU/OC's course completion rates were lower than the other institutions. The author used regression analysis to determine if OU/OC completion rates would continue to be lower than other institutions if student demographics, programs, and levels of study were comparable. The results of the regression analysis demonstrated that the completion rates would still be lower.

Eliesen's (1998) study again shows substantially higher completion rates for students in applied and professional programs. Although OLA's distance delivered programs had lower completion rates than face-to-face delivery programs at companion institutions, there was important information to consider for this research. Eliesen's data confirmed that programs, which were vocationally and career oriented and included courses and tasks that could be used and applied directly to the workplace, yielded higher completion rates. In addition, many of these programs included a face-to-face component as well as distance education components. As the CPCP involved mixed mode delivery and possessed these other facets of career-oriented programs, this research suggested a further line of questions to probe with CPCP students.

Eliesen's data also reiterated the manifold research results about the demographics of successful students. The OLA CPCP program possessed students who demographically reflected higher completion rates. These program students were primarily woman, over 25 years of age, who worked and had family responsibilities, some had post-secondary education, and with immediate career goals related to the



education. They had also chosen this mode of education partly for convenience and accessibility.

### Alignment of Course Objectives to Career Goals

Both small and large-scale research studies provided excellent information about dropout and attrition. For example, Boshier (1995) conducted an analysis of 13,442 participants and reviewed student motivation against cognitive interest, goal orientation, and activity. He discovered a strong linkage between student motivation to complete and the relationship of the course or program to career and personal goals. The studies by Webb (1992) and Williams (1993) reinforced this factor and identified additional factors that promoted completion: vocational goals; open learning; pacing and scheduling; tutor support and contact, and institutional support services. Gatz (1985) research is of interest because she concluded that the “significance of course to the students’ goals was found to be of greatest significance in completion and attrition for the greatest number of students.”(p. 210).

### Course Design and Delivery

The literature provided an insight into many aspects of course design and delivery that may support student completion. Rekkedal (1983) examined how the timing of assignment feedback might affect completion rates. The study involved 127 students in a study and control group. The study group received one-day turnaround of assignment feedback, while the control group received feedback within four days. He found that 91% of the students who received one-day turnaround completed the course, while only 69% who received slower responses completed.

In a related study, Biner (1995) sought to develop an assessment instrument that would assess student attitudes about their studies, and formulate profiles of successful and unsuccessful students. His study confirmed that two factors were very important to students: promptness of having test papers marked and returned quickly, and possession of successful learning strategies. Biner's study supported Rekkedal's findings, and added a dimension related to student personal characteristics.

Coldeway's (1982) research examined the nature of pacing and its effect on course completion. He suggested that "self-pacing often leads students to withdraw or procrastinate, and that the probability of completion increased if the student completed the first assignment (p. 33)." He concluded that paced delivery resulted in higher completion rates, while self-pacing decreased completion outcomes.

Control of pace and timing appears to be a primary reason why distance education students choose this mode of delivery. Research over the past several decades confirms this factor as primary in student choice. Powles and Anwyl (1987) suggested that students choose distance education for flexibility in time and place, open admissions and course choice (p.216)." Roblyer (1999) in studies of two diverse student populations noted that "for students who chose DE, control over pace and timing was more important (p. 157)."

#### Personal Characteristics and Supports

One of the most interesting areas examined in the literature review was that related to suggestions about the commonality in personality characteristics of successful students. Souder (1993) compared face-to-face and distance delivery in a Management of Technology graduate program. His research confirmed Johnson's (2001) study in finding that course performance was equivalent in both delivery modes. However, he also

suggested that a successful distance learner needed the following characteristics: extraordinary commitment, high degree of maturity, and high motivation. His research suggested that the following factors assist students in successful completion: quick feedback on assignments and exams; instructor initiated frequent contact, and strong peer support.

There are strong and consistent themes in the research. Certainly the profile of successful students demonstrated a strong correlation between certain characteristics and success. The factors that encourage successful student completion are repeated in the majority of the research, ranging from the relatively simple need for quick feedback on assignments to the more complex issues of additional tutor and intuitional support and interaction, to ways of increasing student and peer interaction to build a community of learners. The references to the similarity in personal characteristics of successful students appeared frequently in the literature. Successful students appeared to require strong discipline, motivation, and support from peers, instructors and family.

Caffarella (as cited in Miriam, 1993) suggested that educators needed to carefully consider the supports that distance education students require, which she formulates as follows: “maintain and increase motivation; promote effective study habits and a feeling of belonging; provide guidance and access to resources, and answer administrative enquiries (p. 78).”

Similarly, Gatz (1985) discovered a strong link between student success and career goals. Munro (1989) and Olcott (1996) confirmed a theme strongly identified in distance education literature, that access to timely and cost-effective programs is important. Saba (2000) reinforced the need for interaction --student to student, and

instructor to student -- in order to remove some of the perceived barriers of distance education. These themes continued to build on the themes identified for research questions for this study.

Another factor that became predominant in the studies and distance education literature was a mitigating choice issue for many distance education students. Distance education students, especially in graduate and professional development courses and programs, shared some substantial similarities. They were working and a majority had family commitments. This conclusion is not new. In an Australian study, Powles and Anwyl (1987) suggested that, “in view of the finding that Australian external students are older and more likely to be married and to have dependent children than on-campus students, one could speculate that distance from campus may not necessarily be a factor in their choice of the external mode (p. 222).”

The above findings have applicability to the study that was undertaken. Although many CPCP students lived in more remote rural communities, in any enrolment year, students from lower mainland areas accounted for 10% to 20% percent of total students. The pressure of personal, work, and family responsibilities was expected to be a mitigating factor for students choosing to complete OLA’s Career Practitioner Certificate Program or courses within the program, and this issue affected both rural and urban students. In the case of availability of Career Practitioner courses and programs, the OLA audience was primarily a group that was seeking professional and career development. The majority of the students were already working in the field, or seeking work in this field, but the majority of students were employed. This meant that the need for courses and program that fit the life and schedule of a working adult were critical.

Some of the courses were mixed mode delivery, and these included a face-to-face component. These classroom components were offered around weekends, and limited to two or three day blocks, at no more than two or three intervals during the course. There was an expectation that this mode of delivery, and OLA's understanding of the needs of our learners and the demands of their lives, would be a factor in their choice of our program.

In addition to collecting information about students' family and work responsibilities, there was some evidence to suggest that age combined with family responsibility would show a strong correlation. There was an expectation that the majority of the students would be female, between the ages of 25 – 45. The demographic information provided some further clarity about the students who choose this program.

#### Support from Instructors

Support from instructors was identified as a success factor for students throughout the literature. Johnson et al (2000) compared two courses; one offered on-line the other face-to-face. Although students had similar grades in both courses, the students in the face-to-face course were more satisfied with student interaction, student and instructor interaction, and instructor support. Both student cohorts reported similar satisfaction with course content.

This study suggested that additional student-to-student, student-to-instructor interaction and instructor support added to the quality of the distance education experience. In a similar study, Sewart (1982) studied and recommended more intensive involvement by tutors in a tutor/counselor model, and suggested that enhancing the tutor role in this way would improve student completion and performance. From these and

other studies, the research areas for this study included questions about student-to-student and instructor-to-student support.

#### Effectiveness of Administration Systems and Processes

Harrison (1991) studied program development from a systems perspective to devise a model that, “would enable managers or other decision-makers to allocate program resources in order to improve and further develop programs based on specific policy decisions.” He conducted a four-phase study comprised of the following elements:

1. Study of literature to assess components of distance education systems;
2. Consider the content validation of a various instruments;
3. Develop an effectiveness rating scale, and,
4. Field test an effectiveness rating scale.

In a similar study, Holmberg and Bakshi (1992) reviewed courses and assignments and their relationship to specific learning objectives. They reviewed aspects of course design, delivery and evaluation, and found that administration systems and processes could be adapted to include the following factors: better course descriptions and therefore clearer expectations by students, consider trial enrolments in the first part of courses; improve print materials; early and personal contact with tutors and suggested paced study schedules.

Woodley and Partlett (1983) completed a comprehensive review of literature about student dropout. They considered data on successful student completion and variables that promote student dropout. They promoted further study and raised the issue of the difficulty interpreting data and making recommendations from the current literature. They supported further research and suggested the following institutional improvements

in student support: more and better admissions counselling; increased and more active tutoring; more and quicker feedback on assignments; higher quality courses aimed a better engagement of students, and shift in balance of central academic staff attention from course production to presentation. They also suggested that, “drop-out is a systemic problem, relating to the University’s working as a whole and ... it is not due to a neatly encapsulated and isolated malfunction of a single aspect of the University’s operation which can be put right by repairing a single component.” (p. 22).

#### Comparing Face-to-Face and Distance Delivery Models

In considering reviews such as Munro’s (1989) and Olcott’s (1996), key messages were reinforced that had been found elsewhere. Olcott confirmed the wealth of data and analyses about the performance of face-to-face and distance learners. He said that, “empirical research has consistently shown that the academic achievement of distance learners is comparable to that of on-campus students taught face-to-face” (p.104). Olcott also reiterated that distance learners wanted to access courses from the home and workplace, and that these programs needed to be provided in a timely and cost-effective manner.

Saba (2000) confirmed Olcott’s (1996) assertions about the lack of difference in performance between distance and face-to-face students. He further suggested that distance education institutions needed to find ways to build online communities of learners. The similarities in the research reviews of these authors are profound. There is little doubt about the consistent conclusions that are present in this research.

## Forming Educational Theory

Researchers seeking to form educational theory, particularly in distance education, frequently address the area of administrative systems and processes and their effectiveness. Anderson and Garrison (1993) examined the underlying adult education foundations of distance education. Their educational theory is based on educational communications that is reciprocal, consensual (i.e., voluntary), and collaborative (i.e., involving shared control). They propose a model entitled “Transactional Relation in Higher Education” (p. 99), based on an earlier model developed by Garrison. The model shows a three-way interaction between learner, teacher and content, and again reinforces the importance of consistent communication.

Pantzar (1995) suggested that researchers need to build distance educational theory, and that theory should be modelled after more broadly based educational theory. Pantzar further challenged educators to develop common definitions, as a basis to further understanding of the field. One of the challenges in reviewing the literature in this area was the inconsistency in definitions in many areas.

However, Gatz (1985) also suggests that there were opportunities for further research, “a study involving students from a particular subject area, such as math, or type of course, such as general introductory course, could more carefully examine the significance of instructional characteristics . . . It is advised that future studies be limited to a single program population.” Much of the research reviewed here, addressed the commonalities of students in a single program or course, and as Gatz suggests research confined to one student population might by its design offer fewer confounding variables. The research among students of a single program might help the research in this



discipline by considering students who have a strong commonality in many areas: demographics, career interests and educational background.

### Models to Predict Academic Success and Retention

There were a variety of models reviewed that considered ways of assessing and predicting student success. Baath (1982) reviewed seven teaching models and looked at their ease of application in the field of distance education. He found that the models were applicable to “correspondence teaching,” but “the stricter the control towards fixed cognitive goals, the easier the application of the model to correspondence education” (p.39).

Breaugh and Mann (1981) developed a model to predict academic success. Using discriminant analysis, they developed a model to predict success using the following variables: gender, age, undergraduate Grade Point Average, GMAT verbal and quantitative scores. In their analysis of 507 students to assess the accuracy by which successful completion of an MBA could be forecast using available admissions data, they found that by using their model they could predict successful completion with 69% accuracy, whereas an admissions committee could predict completion with 52% accuracy.

Coldeway (1991) demonstrated that Keller’s personalized system of instruction could be used to improve learner performance and determined that paced courses improved learner performance and completion.

Dille and Mezack (1991) conducted a study of 188 students to identify predictors of high risk in failure among students. They determined that, on the Rotter Locus of Control scale, the higher score, the lower the failure rate. They also found that the

Learning Style Indicator was not significant in predicting success, other than suggesting that the less concrete one's learning style, the lower the likelihood of success.

De Freitas et al (1986) conducted a study and developed a model to determine variables affecting attrition and academic success. They compiled substantive student data over a three-year period: Year one – 17,160; Year Two – 12,566, and Year Three – 11,539. Using Tinto's model, they suggested that two variables had an effect on predicting attrition: higher economic status was a predictor of success, and pre-course counselling helped students at risk of drop-out.

Johnson et al (2000) considered success rates as related to the following areas: student interaction; student and instructor interaction, and instructor support. They attributed high success rates to the presence of each of these factors. In an empirical study they compared a graduate on-line course with an equivalent face-to-face course. Their sample size was small, totalling 38 students. They used three instruments: ICES, DOLES and DDE (pp. 34 – 35).

Kennett (1994) used Rosenbaums' Self Control Schedule and Academic Resourcefulness Inventory (SCSRI) in a study that examined the importance of learned resourcefulness and perseverance for students enrolled in an academic self-management. She found that students who dropped out of a self-management program scored low on the SCSRI and concluded "of all the psychological variables, academic resourcefulness consistently best predicted final grades" (p. 4).

Oman (1986) developed a simple, practical model to predict success.. He produced a model accounting for 82% of the variation within student performance. Using stepwise multiple regression analysis, he concluded that he had developed a model to

predict student success. He further suggested that standardized assessment instruments don't predict success.

Peters (1992) conducted research about student dropout at Fern University and compared their dropout rates to other institutions. Using Tinto's model, he suggested that the complexity of dropout was a combination of student and institutional barriers, and therefore difficult to predict. However, he suggested some predictors that indicated a higher probability of student dropout: low parent socio-economic status; lack of academic ability; personal characteristics such as lack of flexibility, lack of goal commitment, poor academic integration, poor social integration, and lack of contact with the institution. He suggested, as did Woodley and Parlett (1983), that institutions often have sufficient information to make changes that would reduce student dropout, but they chose not to institute such measures as enhanced tutor support and counselling.

Steiner and Sullivan (1984) developed a model to predict success in organic chemistry. They sought to develop a profile of a successful organic chemistry student by designing a questionnaire that included a value scale with 78 variables and conducting the experiment with 64 respondents. They suggested that a positive attitude toward chemistry and the discipline resulted in success in this course.

Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) suggested a model of student retention to explain reasons for student withdrawal. He suggested that student characteristics and interactions with the social and academic environments of the institution determined student educational goals.

Toebe (1982) conducted a study involving questionnaires sent to 254 participants, with 122 returned for analysis. Using SPSS, she attempted to determine factors that

contributed to participation and completion of courses. She determined that students were successful for the following reasons: personal satisfaction; need to update knowledge; course faculty who encouraged participation, and self-motivation and good study habits

Trice (1987) used Rotter's Academic Locus of Control (ALC) instrument to develop a 28-item measure. Students in General Psychology were observed for participation in classes. In addition, 78 students kept study diaries and 44 students completed problem sets and had them related to ALC scores. Trice confirmed that ALC was modestly useful in predicting academic success.

In most of the literature discussed above, the research design and methodology is quantitative. Burge (1990) makes a strong case for including stronger qualitative research in distance education, citing more than 50 qualitative studies. Perraton (2000), following a similar theme to Burge, encouraged the use of grounded theory research in distance education.

These theorists were attempting to develop models, tests and processes to predict academic success and student retention. Their research was further evidence to support a strong interest in identifying ways and means of attempting to predict which factors could serve as predictors of successful course completion.

Their methods and processes were of interest for this study, but there did not appear to be one model that was predictably successful or that looked at the full range of factors that had been identified as critical to student successful completion. In considering the kind of research that might be appropriate to define success factors for the CPCP students at the Open Learning Agency, it was decided that these models were

not sufficiently definitive to provide a framework for this study. They were useful in again confirming factors that could be attributed to successful students.

### Summary

The literature review identified the following areas to be associated with student success in distance education: alignment of the course objectives to career goals; course design and delivery features; personal characteristics and supports; support from instructors, and effectiveness of administration systems and processes. These factors were identified consistently throughout the literature, and provided a common set of themes that would inform the development of the research. Additional research provided information about forming education theory, and provided insight into ways in which this research might provide some links from current to new educational theory. Many models developed to predict academic success suggested that this was an area worthy of additional research.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### Population and Sample

The study involved 14 students who were selected from the population of 174 students who had enrolled in one or more courses in the CPCP program. Of these 14 students, 12 were drawn from students who had successfully completed one or more courses within the program. Two students were selected from the group who had not successfully completed a course. The participants from the latter group were drawn from a population that began course work, but did not successfully completed a course. Students who withdrew and completed at least the first assignment were interviewed, following the protocol established by Coldeway (1991).

The process of selecting interview subjects began in April 2003. Anticipating a three to one ratio of potential to actual participants, 44 students who meet the following criteria were selected:

- Completed one course in the program, or,
- Completed two or more courses,
- Represented different geographic regions, and,
- Gender representation that profiled the gender profile of the student profile of the program, and,
- Age diversity, as much as was represented in the student body, and,
- Distribution of successful completion over various courses in various years of study.

In addition, three students who had withdrawn or been unsuccessful in completing a course, but who had completed one assignment in the course were selected.

Once the pool of potential subjects was selected, the process began to assess student interest in participating in the interviews. Due to difficulty contacting students and the unwillingness of some to participate in the study, the list of subjects was expanded several times. Eventually, 14 students were interviewed, after a sample of 44 students was drawn.

Although the 14 students who were interviewed formed a convenience sample, measures were taken to maintain the integrity of the sample, ensuring that the final sample resembled the demographics of the student population as closely as possible. The 14 students in the sample had the following characteristics:

- Participant #1 was female, lived in a rural and remote area, was in the 45 – 54 age range and had completed Grade 12, but had no formal post-secondary education. She had completed two courses in the CPCP.
- Participant #2 was female, lived in a larger Northern B.C. city, and was in the 35 – 44 age range, and had completed a community College certificate program. She had completed one course in the program, and was working in the resident care field, rather than in career development.
- Participant #3 was male, aged 45 – 54, and lived in the metropolitan area of the Lower Mainland. He had completed a University diploma, and two courses in this program.

- Participant #4 was female, lived in a rural community, was in the age 55 – 64 range, and had completed a College certificate program. She had completed one course.
- Participant #5 was female, in a remote and rural community, aged 35 – 44, and had completed an undergraduate degree. She had finished four courses in the program.
- Participant #6 was female, aged 45 – 54, living in a remote and rural community. She had completed a hairdressing program at a Community College, and two courses in the CPCP program.
- Participant #7 was female, aged 45 – 54 and lived in a remote and rural community. She had completed a certificate program at a Community College. She completed two courses in the CPCP, and did not complete her third.
- Participant #8 was female, aged 45 – 54, living in a rural community. She had completed a University diploma and three courses in the CPCP.
- Participant #9 was female, aged 25 – 34, living in a city in the Southern Interior of B.C. She had completed an undergraduate program and two courses.
- Participant #10 was female, aged 45 – 54, living in a rural community. She had no post secondary credentials, and had completed two courses in the program.
- Participant #11 was female, aged 45 – 54, living in a city in Central B.C. She had an undergraduate program, and four courses in the program.



- Participant #12 was female, aged 35 – 44, living in a Lower Mainland city, and possessing a diploma and degree. She had completed one course in the program.
- Participant #13 was female, living in a city in the Southern Interior of B.C. She was aged 25 – 34, and had an undergraduate degree. She had completed three courses.
- Participant #14 was female, aged 25 - 34 living in a city in Central B.C. She had completed a College diploma program and four courses in the program. She successfully completed three courses, and was unsuccessful in completing one.

### Instrumentation

The questions for the survey were taken from the theme areas identified in the literature search. In each theme area, a set of questions were devised that provided opportunities for participants to elaborate on and provide examples within each of the themes. The Participant Interview Guide (Appendix C) was grounded in a substantive body of theory and analyses discovered in researching the literature in this field, and which had been developed using both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies.

### Procedures

An initial phone interview was completed to ascertain if students were interested in participating in the study. This initial phone contact followed a set process. The purpose of the study was introduced, followed by an explanation of the researcher's role. An overview of the methodology and interview structure was provided, as was a strong

confirmation of the confidential nature of the interview and observance of participant confidentiality. Potential participants were provided with timeframes regarding the length of the interview, and the expected outcomes and results.

If participants agreed to participate, the interviewer provided instructions for the process of obtaining completed consent forms (Appendix B). In all cases but one, the researcher received completed consent forms by e-mail, one was received by fax.

Once consent forms were received from each participant, e-mail or telephone interviews were arranged at a mutually agreeable time. Participants were provided with a copy of the interview topics as outlined in the Participant Interview Guide (Appendix C) prior to the scheduled telephone interview.

#### Data Collection

Interviews were conducted from May to July, 2003. Each telephone interview involved a 30 to 40 minute discussion. During each interview, the techniques of probing, seeking clarification, and paraphrasing were used to ensure the accuracy of recording information.

If after the initial review, there was a lack of surety about any of the responses respondents were contacted for a second interview to clarify any responses, or to ask additional questions. While the second interview was not completed with all respondents, it was a very useful means to clarify and confirm responses. These methods were used to ensure the reliability and validity of the transcripts.

After the first and second interview, a final analysis was completed. Following the participant interviews, the data were analyzed; manual and open coding techniques was used to identify common themes.

During the interviews, the researcher made extensive handwritten notes, using the Participant Interview Guide (Appendix C). After each interview, the notes were immediately reviewed, clarified, and notations were added. During the interview, a process was used of seeking to clarify responses by probing, asking for examples, and paraphrasing. With some interviews, this process obviated the necessity of a second interview.

The second interview was used to authenticate and validate the reliability and accuracy of the interview recording. (Information was also authenticated and validated during the initial interview.)

The interviews took the form of opened-ended discussions rather than asking a formal set of sequential questions. The Participant Interview Guide served as a guide to discussion, and provided the opportunity to probe, seek elaboration and clarification, and paraphrase responses to ensure the accuracy of content and meaning in the transcription

An inductive approach was used in the interviews. The Participant Interview Guide and the discussion with respondents were designed to be inductive in nature, but throughout the individual interviews and in the coding of results, the process naturally became deductive as the research progressed. “The development of categories in any content analysis must derive from inductive references concerning patterns that emerge from the data.” (Berg, 2004).

Nevertheless, the inductive approach was used as much as possible throughout the interview phase, although some perceptions developed as the interviews progressed.

Sellitz et al (1964) advocated this approach and recommended the following:

The inspection of non-quantified data may be particularly helpful if it is done periodically throughout a study rather than postponed to the end of the statistical analysis. Frequently, a single incident noted by a perceptive observer contains the clue to an understanding of a phenomenon. If the social scientist becomes aware of this implication at a moment when he can still add to his material or exploit further the data he has already collected, he may considerably enrich the quality of his conclusions (p. 435).

### Data Analysis

In order to ensure that the analysis was first factual the data were analyzed from interviews using open coding and identifying initial themes and areas of commonality. Using the Participant Interview Guide, responses were tabulated within each topic area, and from there the process began of analysis using open coding. Berg (2004) says,

With open coding you carefully and minutely read the document line by line and word by word to determine the concepts and categories that fit the data.... As you continue working with and thinking about the data, questions and even some plausible answers also begin to emerge. These questions lead you to other issues and further questions concerning various conditions, strategies, interactions, and consequences of the data (p.281).

By constantly comparing responses of participants to each other, and to the emerging themes, major themes were identified as they emerged from the research interviews, and that were supported by the findings of previous research.

## Summary

Chosen from a set of selection criteria, 44 students were contacted to gauge their interest in participating in the research. From these students, 14 agreed to participate and a process of obtaining consent forms and arranging phone interviews ensued. Using preliminary and secondary confirming interviews, the participants provided a large volume of data. Extensive notes were taken from the interviews and, in the analysis phase, were coded using manual and open coding techniques. Responses were tabulated within each theme area, and from there the analysis process began using constant comparison and successive approximation. Further details about the analysis and its findings are provided in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

#### Introduction

The purpose of the study was to explore student perceptions of the factors that contributed to successful completion of courses within the OLA Career Practitioner Certificate Program. The purpose was defined in a series of themes, based on a review of the literature, and then a set of questions related to each theme was developed to guide the interviews.

The review of the literature revealed a set of common themes that seemed to predict academic success and successful completion. Developing themes into discussion areas, and then asking respondents questions and engaging in discussions around each of these themes, confirmed the reliability of these characteristics and supports and confirmed the important factors in the respondents' assessment of their success. It was expected that students would perceive program and course content relevant to their career goals and the accessibility of the courses through distance education as primary factors contributing to successful course completion. It was also expected that the quality of the faculty and administrative staff would be a key factor in successful student completion. Previous research suggested that personal characteristics such as strong personal supports and motivation and discipline would be rated highly.

Theme rankings were defined based on the priority ranking by each participant, and the number of priorities that each item received. Participants ranked their personal characteristics as the most important factor in successful completion. As they assessed the list of personal characteristics and supports supplied during the interview, they were

vociferously unanimous in their agreement to each of the personal characteristics. Course design and delivery features ranked highly, and elicited many specific comments about the features that students rated as supporting their successful completion. Alignment of course objectives to career goals and support from instructor were ranked as very important. Some participants felt that the support they received from their employer, colleagues or fellow students was another important factor. Administrative systems and processes were not ranked highly. However, few students indicated any issues in this area, so these results may be somewhat suspect; as had there been issues related to this theme, this factor might have changed in priority ranking.

The original schedule indicated that the research interviews were to be conducted within a three-week period. However, there was considerable difficulty encountered in making first contact with participants. In most cases, it took several contacts, returned phone calls and considerable persistence to locate participants, obtain returned consent forms, and then complete the interview. In about half the interviews other work or family pressures mitigated against completion of the interview at the scheduled time, and a second interview time was required. While the process of qualitative interviews yielded volumes of data, it was more time consuming than originally estimated.

Once the interviews began, some small adjustments were required to the participant interview guide. An open-ended discussion methodology proved the most advantageous in eliciting substantive responses from participants. Two minor changes were made to the participant interview guide after conducting the first interview.

Questions were added to ask participants about their years of work history in the career

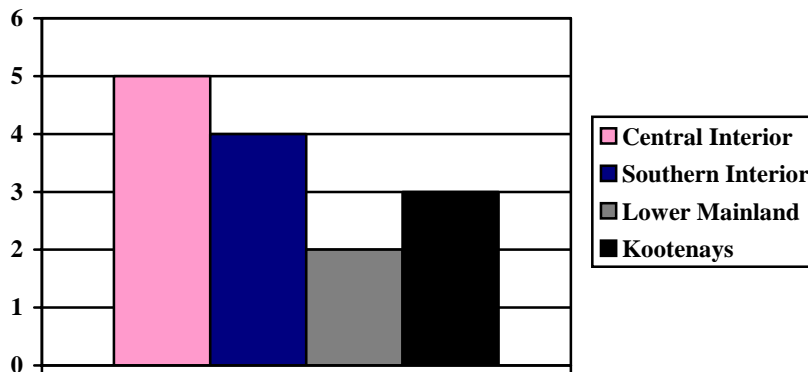
practitioner sector rather than total work history. In addition, the questions about educational experience were adapted slightly.

After the challenges in contacting participants and confirming interview schedules, a revised study plan was constructed. The initial participant contact began on May 2nd, and continued until July 3, 2003. Interviews were completed between May 23<sup>rd</sup> and July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2003. Overall, the results of this study supported the findings of previous research; however, there were some unexpected results. These are discussed in the sections that follow.

### Study Participants

The geographic distribution of the study participants represented a large proportion that were living in rural area, and were more than 500 kilometres from the instructor. Even in the rural areas, some participants lived in cities from 60,000 to 80,000 population.

Figure 1. Geographic distribution of participants (n = 14)



The majority of students were from rural areas in the Central Interior, Southern Interior and Kootenays, although some of these students lived in larger cities. The Lower Mainland students were living in metropolitan areas.



The students interviewed had considerable formal and informal education experience. The majority of those interviewed had some post-secondary education; only two of the fourteen interviewed did not possess an undergraduate degree, diploma or certificate: two had no post-secondary; seven had a degree, five had some college education.

The majority of participants had considerable work experience in the field. The following table outlines the years of work experience possessed by study participants.

Table 3. Years of work experience of study participants

<b>Years of Work Experience</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
None	2	14%
One to three	2	14%
Four to seven	6	43%
Eight to ten	1	7%
Eleven to fifteen	2	14%
Sixteen +	1	7%

Note: Due to rounding, percentages may not total 100%.

In reviewing the demographic profile of those interviewed (representative of the full population), CPCP students fit the profile of successful students, as outlined by Eliesen (1998).

In Eliesen’s study of successful students at OLA, she identified the following characteristics of successful students. The majority of distance students were women (77%), 25 or older (79%), with work (81%) and/or family responsibilities (54%), with some post-secondary education (85%). Their academic goals were to graduate within 5 years (67%), or upgrading, acquiring specific skills or personal interest reasons (24%). 52% said they chose distance education because it was convenient; 48% said they

enrolled in Consortium courses through OLA because it was easier than applying directly to other Consortium institutions.

Analysis of the demographic characteristics of the study participants shows marked similarities. A strong majority (95%) of the participants were female, most with some academic experience -- more than half had an undergraduate degree, diploma or certificate. The majority of students were between the ages of 45 – 64. These data suggest that although the expected high successful completion rates may be attributed, in part, to the career-oriented nature of the program, the student population is representative of a group of students who are generally more successful in distance education programs than other student populations.

#### Reasons for Successful Completion

Analysis of interview data revealed common themes or factors that contributed to successful completion of courses within the CPCP program, or barriers that prevented success. These themes are elaborated upon in the sections below.

Alignment of course objectives to career goals. Participants highly rated the significance of the course and program to their professional development goals and their current work. In the interviews, participants stated unequivocally that these factors were ranked as very important in their reasons for completion. Therefore, these students felt that the applied nature of the program, that is their ability to use the content and resources from each course, in their current work situation, was partly responsible for their successful completion. This finding is similar to that of Gatz's (1985) who found that content relevancy was a strong motivator. Her suggestion that studies involve students from a particular study area, and a single program population might yield more definitive

results than those from multiple student populations and program areas. The results of this study suggested a strong commonality in the reasons for successful completion by these students.

There was a surprising consistency in the responses to the questions about short and long-term professional development goals. The majority of respondents wanted to take additional courses in the certificate, complete the certificate or continue their professional development. In 13 out of 14 interviews, the respondent was either working in the field, or seeking work in the employment counselling field, and felt that the courses were directly related to their career aspirations, short and long term. Only one respondent was hoping to find work in another occupational area and sector, as she found her current work very stressful. She was the only student not working in the career and employment counselling field, and for whom the courses were not directly related to her current work. This participant completed her courses successfully, but was in the process of considering whether she wished to remain working in her current job, or consider work in an entirely different sector.

There was some diversity in the responses to the discussion topic of long-term professional development goals, primarily based on the educational background of the respondents. With one exception, all the interviewees wanted to continue to work in this field and advance their professional development and education in this discipline. Depending on the education possessed by the students, their long-term goals varied from continuing to complete available professional development courses, finishing this certificate program, or completing a Masters program.

The responses to the questions about short and long term professional development goals demonstrated a very strong link between the alignment of respondent professional development goals and the courses within this program. This linkage was further demonstrated in the responses to questions and discussions about the relationship of the course content to current job responsibilities. All the participants confirmed that they used course materials, content, and resources on-the-job, and that there was an immediate benefit in completing the courses.

There was a strong commonality in responses linking transfer of learning to the job. The following comments indicated the ways in which students recognized the transfer of learning to on-the-job practice: “used elements of all the courses in my job; gave me tools and some different options and approaches with clients; made me aware of the many resources and tools available to help clients, and provided structure and a framework for my work.”

Ten of the 14 participants advised that the credential was important to them, and that they needed the credential to find and maintain work in the field. Four suggested that the credential was somewhat important, but that the course content and applicability to their job was more important.

As discussions on this question progressed, it became very clear that the responses, from the first interview on, were related to individual course credentials, not necessarily program credentials. When asked about credits, some participants referred to the formal transcript and the opportunity to complete a full certificate program at the third year university level, while others wanted credit only for courses they had completed.

As expected in a program specifically designed for career and employment counsellors working with career transition clients, the respondents made clear connections between the courses completed and their ability to use new skills and knowledge immediately on-the-job. Without exception, the students demonstrated and exemplified the ways in which they were able to use various course concepts in their work. One student had not yet found work in the field but had found the courses useful in her volunteer work and her personal life. Some students found the short, one credit applied courses more immediately useful than the courses that were more concept and theory based. Students were able to make a connection between having a strong theoretical framework and working more effectively with clients, although some participants had a strong preference for applied rather than theoretical studies.

When asked how they had been referred to the courses or program, the majority of respondents indicated that their employer or program funder had referred them to the CPCP program. In some cases, the suggestions had come from both colleagues and employers. There was consistency in the responses, in that program funders and employers had identified CNPS 300 as a necessary credential for career and employment counsellors.

In all interviews except one, the respondents were working in the field, volunteering, or aspiring to work in the field. They had chosen to take these courses/program because the course work applied directly to the work they were currently doing, or wished to do. One interviewee wished to find work in another field, as her work had a remote relationship to employment and career counselling. She worked in a group home and was finding the work very stressful. In two cases, the respondents had

taken courses specifically because they were hoping to find work or achieve promotions in the field. In the 11 other interviews, the students were working in the field or volunteering and had taken the courses for a variety of reasons.

Students provided many specific reasons about their need for professional development. Several participants were referred by employer or program funder, and needed the courses to gain or maintain employment, or attain a promotion. Other individuals had received a suggestion from a colleague who felt the course was directly applicable to their work (transfer of training to the job). Some participants were looking for a formal credential, especially if they did not have an undergraduate degree. A few interviewees had an undergraduate degree or another formal credential and were taking the course(s) for professional development and increased knowledge of the field and sector. The following lists some of reasons that participants gave for taking the program:

- to obtain employment counselling knowledge and skill;
- to get out of dental assisting into employment counselling field;
- to obtain the full certificate;
- to obtain professional development specific to this field;
- to finish as many courses as possible in the certificate;
- to complete one or two courses a year, especially if available locally;
- to take courses in order to get into the field, and provide additional tools and resources for day to day work.

There was a considerable range of responses related to long-term professional development goals. About one quarter of the respondents wished to complete the full certificate through OLA. About one half of those interviewed stated a commitment to

ongoing professional development, and would consider other OLA CPCP courses, or courses and workshops that met specific professional development goals. The remaining quarter of respondents were interested in pursuing an undergraduate or graduate credential. The reasons given by participants in relation to the question about long-term professional development goals included the following: finishing the certificate; own my own business in this sector; want to continue to improve my skills because I'm looking at another eight to ten years in the field; get full time work in the field; instructing in this field at a community college; continue working and learning in this field; use these credentials to ladder into a degree in social service; complete the certificate; obtain a Masters degree in counselling, and complete diploma or degree in this discipline.

Nine of those interviewed stated that a credential and a recognized university transcript were important to them and to employers in this sector. Four respondents stated that some other factor was more important than the credential. These four students placed the priority on course content or reputation and credibility of instructors. One respondent said that the credential wasn't important and she only needed the courses to get a job in the field.

The responses can be grouped in a few categories. Some participants needed credentials for promotion or to obtain work in their current organization. Other interviewees stated that the courses and program would help toward their upward mobility in the sector. Several suggested that they were interested in the applicability of the course content to their current work, and the expert knowledge of the instructors to help them relate the course content to current practice.

There is a substantial body of literature and research (Gatz ,1985; Souder,1993; Boshier & Collins, 1985) that confirms the strong linkages between high rates of completion and the relationship of program to career and vocational goals. Participants stated that they had found that there was a strong transfer of training element to the courses. This finding is similar to that of Eliesen (1998) who found that the highest pass rates existed in health and human service worker, applied and professional courses.

As the literature suggests, applied programs demonstrate more positive completion rates. In the interviews, respondents indicated a high degree of correlation between the course materials and their ability to gain new skills, tools and resources that were transferable to the job. In addition, the majority of interviewees stated their strong expectation that the courses would be directly applicable to on-the-job performance. The following comments from interviews indicate the degree of synchronicity between course content and on-the-job performance:

- I use it every day on the job, and even at home. I have a better understanding of the issues, and how to stay neutral, it helped when working with colleagues.
- The courses were somewhat useful; I work in a group home, with clients suffering from head injury.
- I found it very useful on the job, and used some courses more directly than others.
- My current job allows only marginal use of the skills as I work in completing orientations for Income Assistance Recipients. I can see using it more in the future.



- I used elements of the courses in my job. The program gave me tools and some different options and approaches with clients, and made me aware of the many resources and tools available to help clients.
- The courses provided structure and a framework, and gave me new ideas that were very relevant to our work with clients.
- Found Active Engagement especially helpful, but all the courses were useful.
- The courses were very useful, the new skills and knowledge made me less judgmental and more objective.
- I found the content very applicable to my work and I've found that I used both theories and tools/approaches.

In addition to the strong linkage between program content and on-the-job performance, the majority of respondents had been referred to the course by their employer or program funding agency, and their employer had paid for all of, or a substantial portion of the course. In some cases, the first course in the program CNPS 300, Career and Employment Counselling had been deemed a requirement by Human Resources Development Canada (funding agency) or by the employer.

Perhaps the strongest motivation for successful completion of at least CNPS 300, were these combined requirements. However, many students had completed additional courses, and while their employer paid their tuition in full, or contributed to tuition costs, completion of the courses was not a job requirement. Nevertheless, the strong reinforcement by employers and Human Resources Development Canada was evidently a strong motivator to successful completion.

There were a range of responses about the importance of and need for academic credit in this sector. Some participants suggested that they started taking courses initially to gain skills, but became more interested in program completion once they were successful in one or more courses. Others who did not have a degree liked the open admissions policy that allowed them to take courses, while maintaining the option of full program completion. Some participants were uncertain about whether they would be interested in completing the full certificate, while others confirmed that they were more interested in completing courses, as they needed new skills and knowledge on the job

Most of the participants related examples of tools, processes and theories that they were able to use immediately on the job. They stated that the applied nature of the courses, and their ability to use “real-world” cases and examples from their workplaces, was very useful in maintaining interest in the course work.

As the research would suggest, the highest completion rates are found in programs that are strongly applied or vocationally oriented (OLA study). The respondents reiterated that they had taken and planned to take CPCP courses because they would further the knowledge and experience and their ability to do their current jobs better and in some cases to obtain promotions. Comments included the following: “I was promoted and needed the training to keep the job. I was able to use the training every day it gave me a better understanding of issues and how to stay neutral.”

In several interviews students confirmed that OLA CPCP courses were only one way of meeting their professional development needs. They wanted the formal credential offered by OLA, but they were also interested in less formal courses that would provide the skills and knowledge needed for their career.

Several participants stated that they appreciated the tools, processes and the relation to the workplace, and did not see the utility in learning theories and concepts. While this issue was not probed extensively, the comments are disturbing from a number of perspectives. This is an area that may be of interest for further study. Do students in applied studies understand the importance of linking theory to practice, or were there issues in the way linkages were made in the courses?

Course design and delivery features. Another factor contributing to course completion was that of course design and delivery features. This was a very broad category and included numerous attributes related to the courses and their delivery.

Mixed mode delivery. Students appreciated the flexibility of distance education combined with the face-to-face sessions at the beginning of the courses. Participants confirmed that they found the self-instruction materials effective. Many study participants confirmed that the combination of face-to-face and distance delivery provided some elements of classroom based learning that were important to their successful completion. Many participants stated that they would have preferred a full classroom based learning experience, but that having some face-to-face sessions contributed to their feeling of interactivity in the on-line portion of the course. The majority of participants confirmed that the face-to-face sessions provided an opportunity to establish a relationship and rapport with their fellow students and the instructor. They confirmed that feedback from and interaction with other students and the instructor was an important component in their successful course completion.

Students had a high degree of comfort with the Internet-based course software. Some participants had experienced some issues early in their course or program, but

stated that WebCT was an easy platform to use for access and discussion groups. There was a diversity of responses about the use of online discussion groups. Many participants suggested that they would have liked a larger volume of on-line discussion, although some stated that they became frustrated because their entire class had not equally participated in the discussions. They stated that they appreciated the flexibility provided by asynchronous on-line discussions. Their control over day-to-day course pacing and timing was important so that they could manage their coursework within their own work and personal schedules.

Course content. The content of the course and program were identified as pertinent and relevant to the work being done by students. Participants commented on the importance of maintaining course information as representative of current workplace practice and reflective of industry norms and standards. Participants were strongly supportive of the quality of the self-instructional materials. They found the materials and the assignments representative of the current work they practiced in the field, and they identified the student materials as clear and easy to use.

Feedback and interaction. Participants were unanimous in stating that feedback and interaction was essential. Some students suggested that without the face-to-face workshops combined with on-line discussion groups their commitment and motivation may have been lacking. Other students acknowledged that their personal discipline was a critical success factor, but that the mixed mode delivery was also a significant factor in their successful completion. Some students stated that they struggled with the distance education component of the courses, and would have preferred even more face-to-face delivery. Most students suggested, at some point in the interview, that if other factors in

their life permitted, they would choose face-to-face delivery. Some students had attempted to implement informal study groups. In a couple of instances, there were several students from one community or one workplace. In these cases, the institution of informal study groups was effective. The students who participated in these study groups stated an interest in and need for more group activity and one student said that she “missed the social interaction that she would have found in a classroom based course.”

This underlying theme in the interviews may be an important reminder to institutions offering distance education. The vast majority of students would still prefer traditional classroom based instruction. They chose distance education for many other reasons involving access, convenience, cost, and practicality. However, there is an overwhelming refrain that choruses the need for as much interaction and connection as possible. One student encouraged OLA to instigate more interaction on on-line conferences. She stated that in at least one her courses, the online conferencing was used very little. The lack of interaction was cited as a challenge for students. One participant summed up this point particularly well in her comment, “distance education gave me more flexibility, but it took a lot of discipline.”

Personal Characteristics and Supports. Student personal characteristics and supports were identified as the most important factor in successful completion. In reviewing the individual results related to these discussions items, respondent ranked themselves very highly on the six personal characteristics common to successful distance education completers. In addition, the majority of students indicated they had benefited from strong support from family, friends, colleagues and employers, and suggested that support was an important factor in their successful completion.

For the two students interviewed who had withdrawn from a course after completing at least one assignment, personal and family issues were cited as the reason for withdrawal. These students had successfully completed other courses, but in the course from which they had withdrawn, personal issues had manifested which made course completion impossible for them at that particular time.

These reasons should be interpreted with caution, however. As some research has suggested (Coldeway, 1982), students may state that their personal situations are responsible for failure in course completion, when there may be other mitigating factors. For example, if a student found the course more difficult than expected, or was disinterested in the course content, they might not willingly cite that as the reason for withdrawal.

All of the participants had other work and family responsibilities and, with one exception, cited strong family support as a significant reason for their course completion. Participants stated that support from their employer, financial or otherwise, was a significant factor. Thirteen of the participants were working full- or part-time. One participant had a disability and was looking for a career change due to her disability. She had a significant volunteer work history, although no paid work in this sector. Twelve participants had a partner, 10 had children, three were caring for aging parents, and four had other family related responsibilities. Eleven of the 14 interviewees had received full or partial tuition support for the program. Ten of those had received financial support from their employer.

The strength of response related to personal characteristics was surprising strong during the interviews. In the interviews there was a marked resonance that participants

noted in hearing the list of personal characteristics. The personal characteristics, as follows, were taken from the research that identified a similarity in the characteristics of successful distance education students:

- good study habits;
- motivated to complete;
- ready to learn (scheduling and timing);
- self-disciplined;
- self-directed;
- confident in their professional and personal competence.

When participants were asked if there were other personal characteristics that they felt were pertinent to their successful course completion, the unanimous response was that this list fairly represented the characteristics critical to successful completion. It was interesting to note that the two students, who were unsuccessful in completing a course, also felt that they possessed these personal characteristics. However, both these students had successfully completed other courses in the program, but family circumstances had caused them to withdraw from another course.

Support from instructor. Timely feedback on assignments was also highlighted as a critical success factor. Most participants were satisfied with the timeliness of the feedback, and stated that quick turnaround of assignments was very important to their continued motivation, and built self-confidence in their coursework. One student said that she would have liked feedback within 24 hours.

Despite the research completed, it was surprising to hear the strength of feelings expressed by students if they felt that assignment feedback had not been timely or

substantive. The importance of quick turnaround time on assignments was further emphasized throughout the interviews. Students who had received timely feedback with an appropriate level of specific comments from instructors, indicated that this was very important in the successful completion and ongoing motivation to complete the course. Students who had not received sufficient or timely feedback identified this as a significant issue in maintaining ongoing commitment to the course, and motivation to complete. These results support the research results of Coldeway (1991), Rekkedal (1983), and Woodley and Partlett (1983). Students indicated that it was important that instructors' knowledge and experience reflected current practice in the field. There was also agreement among the participants that the faculty provided excellent instruction and current knowledge of the field. Many interviewees reiterated that the ability of the instructors to tie theory to current issues and events in the field was particularly important.

In response to the question about adult learning, the majority of the participants were unfamiliar with the principles of adult education. However, when explained, there was agreement among the participants that the focus on and understanding of the needs of adult learners was very important. Several participants suggested that they were pleasantly surprised by the degree to which instructors asked for participation; drew on the experience and knowledge of students, and taught from a frame of reference that assumed that both facilitator and student had experience and knowledge to enhance learning.

Participants made many positive comments about the knowledge and experience possessed by their instructors. They suggested that these factors were very important



when combined with up-to-date and relevant content. Instructors were complimented on their ability to encourage students to complete, and their willingness to provide additional help and support when needed. Some students suggested that they would have appreciated more instructor-initiated contact.

Effectiveness of administration systems and processes. A few participants -- those with substantive background in the discipline and/or extensive post-secondary academic experience -- stated that the open admissions policy resulted in admission of students without sufficient experience. The open admissions policy permitted entry of students from a variety of experiences and education backgrounds into this course. In some courses, there were students with a Masters degree in the same class as students with no formal post-secondary education. For the experienced and educated practitioners, the lack of knowledge and experience by the novices in the field became an issue, especially in face-to-face sessions. The experienced participants felt that less experienced students impeded their learning.

Administration systems and processes were never cited as a factor in support of successful completion. Some students identified some issues that they had with administrative systems and processes, but in identifying factors supporting successful completion, this factor was never identified. Some students felt that the support they received from fellow classmates, employers, or colleagues was worthy of mention in the “other” category as a separate item, because it had been very important in their successful completion.

There were a variety of responses in the discussions of these topics. Some students felt that they had not received pre-admissions counselling. Although on further

probing, because the pre-admissions counselling was conducted informally, the participants did not define these early conversations as pre-admissions counselling. They remembered the early discussions with program staff as conversations about the program, and explorations of their interest and experience in the field.

Some students had attended orientation sessions; others participated via audio or video conferencing. The feedback on these sessions was mixed. Some students liked having an opportunity for initial contact with their instructor and colleagues; others did not find it useful. There was some suggestion that the students who found the orientation sessions most meaningful were those with least experience in the field.

#### Most Important Factors

Participants were given a list of five factors and asked to rank them, determining the top three that they attributed to completing the course(s) in which they were enrolled. The ranking of factors resulted in interesting outcomes. Some respondents had difficulty in assigning a numeric ranking, but when prompted reluctantly agreed to prioritize success factors. Two respondents said either that all or some of their factors were equal in importance. The most important factors identified in the rankings were program content and personal characteristics.

#### Summary

Demographics. The demographics of students in the CPCP mirrored those identified by Eliesen (1998) as those commonly possessed by successful students. They were primarily female; the majority possessed some post-secondary credential, were aged 45 – 64 and enrolled in a career-related professional program. The study participants confirmed that this program provided a significant correlation between their professional

development goals, and the program content. They suggested that the applied nature of the program contributed to their ability to utilize the knowledge and skills immediately in their own practice. Students also commented on their interest in obtaining formal academic credentials in order to continue working in the field, and to move upward in their organizations.

Mixed mode. Mixed mode delivery was cited as an important factor. The majority of participants confirmed that if this program was available in classroom delivered format, and they were able to fit this kind of delivery into their work and family schedules, they would choose full face-to-face delivery. However, given the other variables, the combination of face-to-face and on-line delivery was a workable mode attributing to their successful completion.

Student personal characteristics. Students' personal characteristics were cited as the most important factor in their successful completion. Participants, including the two students who had not completed a course, cited each of the personal characteristics as vital for distance learners. The two students who did not complete felt that they possessed the personal characteristics, but that serious personal and family issues had mitigated against their successful completion of courses. The discussion of these personal characteristics resulted in the most enthusiastic and compelling results of the interviews. Students confirmed that the following characteristics accurately reflected those required to complete courses with the CPCP: good study habits; motivated to complete; ready to learn (scheduling and timing); self-disciplined; self-directed and confident in their professional and personal competence.

Support from instructors. Support from instructors was cited as important, particularly as related to timely feedback and quick turnaround on assignment marks. Substantive and appropriate feedback was also cited as an important motivator. Students confirmed that instructor knowledge of the practice in both applied and academic contexts was important.

Effective administrative systems and procedures. The discussion about effective administrative systems and processes was a less enthusiastic discussion point than any other factor. Open admission was cited as an issue by those participants with more experience and education. They suggested that the range of student experience and knowledge meant that discussions were not as full and meaningful as they expected. There were no other significant issues identified related to this factor.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### Introduction

The Career Practitioner Certificate Program (CPCP) at the Open Learning Agency located in Vancouver, British Columbia has experienced unusually high successful student completion rates. Over the first two years of the program (2000-2001, 2001-2002), nearly 90% of the students successfully completed the course(s) in which they were registered. These rates of completion are markedly higher compared with other similar institutions and programs.

There was very little information to explain why the completion rates for this program were higher than other distance education programs and courses at OLA or other institutions. Consequently, the literature review and this research provided possible reasons for these higher success rates. The research question for this study was to explore student perceptions of the factors that promoted and encouraged successful course completion for students registered in the Open Learning Agency's Career Practitioner Certificate Program. When combined with program design and course content that had a direct relevance to the students' career goals, personal characteristics and supports appeared to be the most substantive component of the high successful completion rates in this program. Students also reinforced that the combination of distance education and face-to-face workshops assisted in maintaining commitment, motivation, and discipline to complete courses successfully. Several participants suggested that the face-to-face component was critical to their success.

## Personal Characteristics

Institutions have control, at least to some extent, over student personal characteristics and supports. They can devise admissions assessments, and involve administrative and instructional staff in the admission of potentially successful students, and the support of students who struggle at various points throughout a program. Toebe (1982) reinforces this premise by suggesting that the characteristics of successful students are personal motivation, study habits, and a facilitator who encouraged participation through interaction. Souder (1993) confirms this finding, stating that learners need extraordinary commitment and a high degree of maturity and motivation. In the participants' responses to the questions about student commitment and motivation, they assessed themselves as committed, motivated, and disciplined. Participants identified their own personal characteristics as one of the most important factors in successful course completion.

The commonality in personal characteristics among the students in this study suggests that unless institutions are prepared to allow students to self-select they need to find ways of ensuring that students possess the appropriate personal characteristics to mitigate for successful completion. Many researchers have worked to devise assessment instruments and tools to predict academic success, some with more success than others. Whatever the method of assessment, ensuring that students have these characteristics and skills is vital, not only to ensure that the program has high successful completion rates, but also that students attain the education and the confidence they need in their profession.

From the literature review conducted, a series of personal characteristics were identified. Participants were asked to assess the degree to which they possessed these characteristics. The characteristics were outlined in the interviews and included a summary of characteristics representing the most frequently occurring characteristics identified in the research.

Student characteristics were defined as follows: good study habits; motivated to complete; ready to learn (scheduling and timing); self-disciplined; self-directed, and confident in their professional and personal competence. Family support included: moral support; active support from partner and others, and provision of time to study. Support from employer was described as: time at work to study or complete homework; support from co-workers, and financial support. Technical skills were a composite of access to computers and the Internet and comfort in working with the software required to access the courses and submit assignments.

The same skills that seem to predict success in the workplace, not surprisingly, may also predict success in academe. Kennett (1994) concluded “of all the psychological variables, academic resourcefulness consistently best predicted final grades” (p. 4). Research of workplaces in the past decade (Conference Board of Canada, 2000) has confirmed that resourcefulness is also a critical success factor in the workplace. Assessment may identify the skills gaps and provide a way of identifying the necessary supports for students. Supports such as additional instructor or administrative resources for higher risk students, may assist institutions in improving completion rates. If institutions agree that employability skills match the personal characteristics of successful students, they may wish to require students to complete an assessment instrument as one

of the tools required to gain acceptance to programs. Combining assessment instruments with an interview between an advisor and student, whether face-to-face or by phone, may provide quality pre-admissions counselling. As Oman (1986) suggests, assessment models are more effective when combined with pre-admissions counselling.

### Courses Aligned to Career Goals

In the many research studies reviewed, there was substantial evidence to support the assumption that students in career-related or applied programs demonstrate higher rates of successful completion than students in less vocationally-oriented programs. The CPCP program was specifically designed to meet the professional development needs of a specific sector, career practitioners. The results of this study indicate that the program was successful in meeting the needs of career practitioners. Respondents made a direct connection between course work and applicability in their workplace, their intended workplace, or in their volunteer work.

This result supports the findings of Eliesen (1998), Burge (1990), Black et al (1994), Webb (1992), and Williams (1993), confirming that career related and applied programs generate higher levels of successful student completion. The interviews in this study demonstrated a strong relationship between the transfer of training or learning directly to the workplace, and increased student commitment and motivation to complete their course(s) successfully. The strength of the comments about the currency and relevance of program content, and the knowledge and experience of faculty, confirms that these two factors are important to students. In order to meet the needs of students, career related programs should be constantly reviewed and updated, and instructors encouraged to share the breadth of their experience in the traditional or virtual classroom.



## Course Content

Current and relevant content is a critical factor for institutions offering programs in any discipline. Adaptation and review of programs on a three or five-year term, is not sufficient. In the career development field, as in other sectors, there should be frequent adaptation of the curriculum. Case studies, assignments, texts, and web references should be reviewed after each course delivery, and changes made if materials or resources are out-of-date. While this may be a time consuming and costly exercise, if completed frequently, it becomes less onerous.

In reviewing the many factors identified in this area, study participants also suggested that several other factors were important to their successful completion. Many stated that they felt the content reflected current issues and practice in the field, and that the instructors were also aware of the many challenges evident in these sectors' workplaces. The participants commented on their ability to complete assignments and projects and both relate them to their workplace, and utilize workplace examples. They also suggested that in many of the courses, they were able to use new skills and knowledge immediately in their work thereby facilitating an immediate transfer of training. The course and program content was relevant immediately, and the majority of participants could identify several examples of using new skills and knowledge on-the-job.

There may be some application of these findings to curriculum design and development of both applied and non-applied programs. Is there a possibility of adapting less specifically career-oriented programs to include the elements that have been identified as critical success factors for these students? Can other career-oriented

programs benefit from the results gathered here? For example, is there a way in which the sciences (typically having the lowest rates of successful completion, especially when presented in distance format) can utilize the methods deemed successful in career and vocational programs? Steiner (1984) demonstrated that higher success rates resulted when organic chemistry students were interested in the subject and the field. To quote Gatz (1985) again, “significance of course to the student’s goals was found to be of the greatest significance in completion and attrition for the greatest number of students” (p. 210). If students in academic courses were able to see the relevance of the course and program to their career goals, would we see higher success rates?

#### Successful completion based on selection and recruitment

Selection and recruitment to courses and programs was addressed throughout the literature. Many researchers attempted to design models to find ways of selecting those students who were most likely to succeed. Other researchers attempted to design processes to provide support to help students complete. In reviewing the selection of students for this program, OLA administrators confirmed that they counselled many prospective students to gain more knowledge and experience before entering the program. In a small program like the CPCP, with administrators who have in-depth knowledge of the sector, one-on-one pre-admissions counselling can be very effective. For larger programs that do not have these kinds of resources, providing personal counselling becomes a much more complex and challenging task.

And do institutions need to become even more concerned about successful student completion rates? Government funding for public post-secondary institutions has become comparatively less and the market is becoming more and more competitive. Increasingly,

consumer-oriented students drive post-secondary institutions. These factors may prompt institutions to target successful student completion rates and evidence of linkages between programs and work as means of attracting and retaining students. As students begin to demand evidence that their education will help them find work, then as educational consumers they will be increasingly rigorous in demanding that institutions provide education and training that leads to successful completion and employment. As educators gain clarity about the factors that attribute to successful completion, they will be more able to develop programs with higher completion rates.

#### Turn-Around Time and Assignment Marking

Turn-around times on marking assignments is another important factor for students. There is a plethora of research (e.g., Rekkedahl, 1983; Souder, 1993) to demonstrate that quick turnaround time on assignments is an important factor in successful course completion. Participants stated that this feedback motivated them to continue in the course, and helped them to adapt their study habits and assignment preparation based on instructor feedback.

Participants were unanimous in stating that feedback and interaction was essential and that, without the face-to-face workshops combined with online discussion groups, their commitment and motivation may have been lacking. This underlying theme in the interviews may be an important reminder to institutions offering distance education. It suggests that a majority of students still prefer traditional classroom-based instruction. The participants chose distance education for many other reasons involving access, convenience, cost and practicality. However, there was a strong message that reinforces the need for as much interaction and connection as possible.

There are many ways to ensure that students receive feedback and grades quickly. One of the most effective is to contract with faculty to ensure that assignments are marked in a timely fashion, and that speed of service standards are posted and known to students. For example, Royal Roads University and Athabasca University require faculty to adhere to quality of service standards in responding to assignments, e-mail, and other student contact. Distance institutions may want to review their quality of service standards, faculty contracts, or other mechanisms that ensure appropriate turn-around time.

#### Importance of Academic Credentials versus Transfer of Training to the Job

The results of the interviews related to credentials and career-related training were very surprising. The expectation was that credentials were very important for students. However, the results suggested that the relationship of the courses and program to on-the-job performance were more important than academic credentials. Most interviewees indicated that credentials were an added benefit, but were not the deciding factor in choosing or completing the courses. The study participants confirmed that they were able to use course materials, content and resources on-the-job, and that there was an immediate transfer of training to on-the-job performance.

Participants provided remarkably similar comments about the greater importance of professional development versus academic credit. Typically their comments included statements such as the following: “used elements of the courses in my job; gave me tools and some different options and approaches with clients; new ideas were very relevant to our work with clients, and very applicable to my work, use both theories and tools/approached.”

### Designing Programs to Meet Market Needs

In designing new programs, or revising curriculum in current career oriented programs, the relationship of course content to sector or occupational practice is critical. The participants ranked on-the-job utility, as very important.

For institutions, the needs assessment and market research component of course and program development cannot be too strongly emphasized. Some institutions may be tempted to launch new courses or programs, while assuming that they and their instructors know the needs of the marketplace. However, sectors, occupations, contract requirements, funder needs, and client expectations change frequently. Using a market-driven approach for program development is critical to ensure that it meets the needs and demands of students and employers. The market-driven approach was used extensively by OLA in program design and adaptation. Faculty were chosen because they had the requisite mix of applied and academic knowledge and experience. Continual involvement with employers in the sector combined with eliciting feedback from employers and students helped maintain the currency of the curriculum and its relevancy to the marketplace.

Institutions continue to consider the reasons why one program or course attracts students while another does not. The results suggest that students chose to attend the CPCP because the majority had been referred to the program funders, employers, and colleagues. These referrals from employers and funders suggest that OLA had been successful in assessing and meeting the needs of employers in the sector. The Career Practitioner sector is relatively new, and since most of the career and employment

counselling performed has recently moved from the Federal and Provincial government bailiwick to private contractors and consultants, the availability of training, education and professional development has been limited. OLA's program was the first in B.C. to offer the combination of academic credit, applied skills, and counselling theories and concepts taught by instructors with a solid academic record and work history in the field, and which was provided using mixed mode delivery.

It may not be too great a leap to suggest that "offering the right product at the right time" may have been, at least, partly responsible for student choice. OLA provided accessible programming for those participants who found it difficult to attend face-to-face training. This applied to students in metropolitan and remote rural communities who were unable to attend traditional courses due to work and family responsibilities. Students in more remote and rural communities also found the program accessible because of the substantial on-line component. Most of the participants interviewed had taken one of these shorter courses, and were attracted because the two or three day courses provided applied skills, interaction with colleagues and instructors, and academic credit. Perhaps the variety and flexibility of the course offerings, combined with the aforementioned program features provided many career practitioners with the training required, and therefore they were motivated to successfully complete their studies. The factors that prompted student choice and then completion of this program were referrals from employers, program funders (HRDC primarily) and colleagues. With strong encouragement from colleagues, employers, and program funders, students suggested that they were motivated to complete the courses. Colleagues referred their peers because they were satisfied with the program, and this measure of satisfaction from peers was a

powerful motivator to others to apply and then to successfully finish the courses. Study participants stated that they saw the new skills and knowledge introduced by colleagues on their return to the workplace, and were motivated to enrol and complete OLA courses. These active referrals from students, combined with continued support for HRDC, were significant factors for new students who wanted to complete the courses and acquire the same level of education and knowledge as their colleagues. In addition, the extensive marketing in the small sector meant that the OLA program became well known as education and training were discussed. OLA CPCP program managers and coordinators used networking extensively to market the program, and to conduct formative evaluations by asking for program and course feedback frequently.

Throughout program development, OLA worked with career practitioner organizations and employers in the sector. Through many years of presentations to employer groups, at conferences, and on sector web sites, the program became well known and regarded.

For institutions developing career programs, or for other organizations offering career practitioner programs, or any career-related program, the linkages to funders, employers, and employer and practitioner organizations through marketing and advertising are important. Career practitioner programs need to have a firm foundation in the sector to which they provide education. Without this support, the program can neither be successful nor serve the needs of the sector and its clients.

## Recommendations

In conclusion, based on the research conducted and reviewed in this study, the following recommendations are suggested to enhance successful student completion in distance education institutions:

Recommendation 1: Review systems, processes and policies to ensure that they support successful completion by students.

There appear to be a number of institutional changes that could result in higher rates of successful student completion. These changes require attention to many factors in each program area or discipline.

In this thesis, and in other research, the issue of appropriate recruitment and selection methods has provided considerable fodder for the research appetite. While the CPCP selection methods were managed informally, the program outcomes suggest that this may have been a factor. If Admissions staff has the time and resources to complete an appropriate in-depth admissions and career advising process with each student, then there may be opportunities to ensure that students have better chances of success. This is an important issue in distance programs where success rates are commonly low, such as in the sciences.

Institutions may want to review their rationale for new program development. Are new programs designed to meet the needs of employers and students? Is there a full market research process completed and analyzed before programs are launched? If program graduates cannot find work in their field, then there will be significant issues for future recruitment of students to the program



Recommendation 2: Make faculty accountable for quick turnaround times on assignments and exams.

Institutions such as Royal Roads University and Athabasca University have instituted specific accountability measures for their faculty. These include such measures as speed of service standards on responding to student enquiries, marking assignments and submitting final marks. These institutions have recognized that a students' primary contact is with their instructor, and consequently the instructor has a primary responsibility for ensuring the success of that student. In this study participants frequently reiterated the importance of having faculty respond quickly with assignment feedback and marks. They also emphasized the importance of having faculty commit to overt support by initiating contact and encouraging participation and involvement.

Recommendation 3. Review and assess the reasons for higher success rates in applied and professional programs, and consider ways in which other programs may adapt their programs to reflect some of the practices used in applied and professional programs.

Throughout this research, and in the literature review, there were many references to higher success and completion rates in applied and professional programs. For example, in this research students stated that their ability to apply their learning immediately on the job was a powerful motivation to complete the course. The applied nature of the assignments, and their ability to use workplace cases and experiences in their assignments made the immediate applicability of their new skills evident. The increase of co-operative and practicum options in many programs are one way of including a strong applied element in academic programs. These elements build a

students ability to transfer their learning to a workplace. Institutions may wish to consider adding either of these elements to current programs.

Recommendation 4. Continually use formative and summative evaluations to adapt courses.

While most institutions complete course and program evaluations, the reality of the costs of curriculum adaptation and review frequently prevent any significant change to content and delivery. In distance education courses where the majority of the content is offered in a formal and prepared manner, adaptation is critical. If program content is to meet the needs of the marketplace, this evaluative process must be rigorously undertaken and substantive course adaptation completed on a continual basis.

In the CPCP, instructors and course designers had the authority to make course changes as the course progressed, and as students provided feedback that necessitated changes to content and structure. Students and faculty frequently noted web sites and references that needed to be deleted or changed, and these changes were made immediately. After each course was completed, instructors, administrators and course designers made immediate changes based on summative course feedback. These frequent adaptations kept the curriculum current and relevant. Instructors also continually adapted case studies and assignments to reflect current practice. Olgren (1995) suggests that “course designs should use a variety of interactive activities that engage the learner in analyzing, integrating, and applying within a context of “real world” problems, case studies, or simulations” (p.91).

Recommendation 5. Consider adapting full distance programs to mixed mode delivery.

In this research and in the literature review, there were many comments about the value of mixed mode delivery. The study participants confirmed that the mix of face-to-face and distance education was advantageous. Participants stated that they valued the opportunity to experience a portion of the course in the classroom. They valued the interpersonal communication and rapport with their colleagues and the instructor. Telford (as cited in Thomas, 1995) confirmed that students preferred mixed mode delivery that offers some face-to-face instruction. Institutions may wish to review distance education offered programs, and consider if a classroom-based delivery is possible as part of the program.

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## APPENDIX A

### Participant Recruitment Guide

#### Do you have time to speak with me now?

##### **Purpose of Call**

I am calling to seek your interest in participating in a research project about OLA's Career Practitioner Program. Your participation is strictly voluntary and no one will ever know that you were contacted or that you chose to participate or not. If you agree to participate and during the phone interview wish to stop at any point, please let me know, and we will do so.

This project will fulfill my thesis requirements for completion of the Masters in Distance Education at Athabasca University. If you agree I will conduct two phone interviews with you:

- The first will take from 60 – 90 minutes
- The second will verify information from the first, and will take from 15 – 30 minutes.

##### Who am I

My name is Heather Stewart. I'm a graduate student in the Athabasca University Masters in Distance Education Program. I am also the Director of the Southern Interior, Skills Centres for Open Learning Agency. I direct the design, delivery and evaluation of the Career Practitioner Certificate Program in which you participated. Your involvement in this project will serve to objectives:

- To provide information related to my thesis project
- To contribute to changes or adaptations that OLA will make to the program based in part on your information and opinions.

##### ***The research project***

*The research project is designed to explore student perceptions of the factors that promote and encourage successful course completion for students in Open Learning Agency (OLA) Career Practitioner Certificate, and to ascertain factors that may have prompted student withdrawal from the program. The interview and discussion will focus on the following areas:*

- Alignment of the course objectives to your career goals
- Course design and delivery features
- Personal characteristics and supports
- Support from instructor
- Effectiveness of administration systems and processes
- Most important factors that contributed to course completion or withdrawal

I also have a few demographic questions at the conclusion of the interview.

If you agree to participate, we will arrange a mutually agreeable time for a phone interview. The first interview will take approximately 60 – 90 minutes. I hope to conduct the phone interviews over a two-week period beginning \_\_\_\_\_. After I have completed an initial transcription of our phone discussion, I will call you again to verify my documentation of the interview. The second phone conversation will take approximately 15 – 30 minutes.

## Confidentiality

Your comments and information will be entirely confidential. No comments and information will be attributed to you in the thesis, or in any other material. I commit to maintaining the anonymity of participants. In no way will your participation affect any future course assignments or evaluations you may receive.

## **Agreement**

*If you agree to participate I would like to email or fax you a consent form that requires your signature to formally consent to participation in the study.*

Are you willing to participate?

## APPENDIX B

### **Consent Form for Student Participation**

I hereby consent to participate in the research project entitled, "*Exploring the factors that encourage students to successfully complete the OLA Career Practitioner Certificate Program (CPCP)*". This research will be conducted by Heather Stewart a graduate student of Athabasca University. Ms. Stewart is also the Director, Southern Interior, OLA, and directs aspects of the design, delivery and evaluation of the CPCP. Her role is to gather and analyze information from the interviews in a non-biased manner. The research procedures used in the project have been cleared through the research ethics review of Athabasca University.

I understand that my participation in the study will involve participation in two phone interviews with Ms. Stewart. The first phone interview will take from 60 – 90 minutes. The follow-up interview will be used to verify information gleaned during the first interview. The second phone interview will take from 30 – 60 minutes.

The research project is designed to explore student perceptions of the factors that promote and encourage successful course completion for students in Open Learning Agency (OLA) Career Practitioner Certificate, and to ascertain factors that may have prompted student withdrawal from the program. The interview and discussion will focus on the following areas:

- Alignment of the course objectives to your career goals
- Course design and delivery features
- Personal characteristics and supports
- Support from instructor
- Effectiveness of administration systems and processes
- Most important factors that contributed to course completion or withdrawal

In addition, the interviewer will ask a series of questions seeking demographic information.

Please sign the form to indicate your understanding of and agreement to the following principles:



- I understand that my participation is completely voluntary, and that I may stop the interview at any point if I so choose.
- The general plan of this study has been outlined to me, including any possible known risks
- I understand that the results of this research may be published or reported but my name will not be associated in any way with any published results
- I understand that my comments will be held in **strict confidence** and will not be related in any way with grade or other student assessments - my anonymity is guaranteed.

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Date

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Signature

## APPENDIX C

### **Participant Interview Guide**

My name is Heather Stewart. I'm a graduate student in the Athabasca University Masters in Distance Education Program. I am also the Director of the Southern Interior, Skills Centres for Open Learning Agency. I direct the design, delivery and evaluation of the Career Practitioner Certificate Program in which you participated. Your involvement in this project will serve two objectives:

- To provide information related to my thesis project
- To contribute to changes or adaptations that OLA will make to the program based in part on your information and opinions.

I appreciate the time you have volunteered to speak with me today, and to engage later in a short follow-up interview. I know you're a busy person, and your information will be valuable to us in making changes and improvement to our program, and through my thesis in providing information to other program and course designers.

I do not have set formal questions, but would like to engage in a discussion about various aspects of the course, and what factors helped you to successfully complete your course(s), and what factors hindered.

The interview will take from 60 – 90 minutes. There are no set questions, but rather a series of discussion items. There are six areas for discussion:

- Alignment of the course objectives to your career goals
- Course design and delivery features
- Personal characteristics and supports
- Support from instructor
- Effectiveness of administration systems and processes
- Most important factors that contributed to course completion or withdrawal

At the end of the interview I have a series of demographic questions for you.

These discussion areas are intended only as a guide. If there are other factors that contributed please include these at any point in the discussion. I will also give you time at the end of the discussion to add to our conversation.

I will be taking extensive notes as we proceed through the discussion. I may need to ask you to clarify or paraphrase your responses, to ensure that I have a complete understanding of your point. If you don't understand a question that I ask, please feel free to ask me to clarify or paraphrase the question.

If at any time you don't wish to proceed with the interview please advise me and we will stop.

### Alignment of course objectives to career goals

- What are your short and long term professional development goals?
  - Describe how you expect to achieve these goals
- Were you motivated to take the OLA course(s) to meet professional standards or credentials? If so, why. If not, why not?
  - How did this course(s) contribute to you professional development goals?

If you did not complete the course, what factors prompted you to withdraw? (Interviewer will move to the factors to ascertain which factors contributed to the students' withdrawal, and which factors contributed more than others.)

- Describe how the OLA Career Practitioner Certificate Program helped you do your current job better.
- What facets of the course do you feel may help you get a better job?
- Were you referred the course by your employer?
- Did you want to obtain specialized knowledge for your current job?
- Was the academic credit important? If not, why not? If yes, why?

### Course design factors

There are many reasons that learners like or dislike elements of distance learning courses. I would like your opinion about the factors that were most and least helpful to you.

The following list will be used by the interviewer to guide the discussion:

#### Pre-admissions counselling

- good info and entry support
  - therefore students make good decisions to enter

#### Course design

- initial orientation session
- like flexibility of distance education
- assignment feedback was timely
- work-related assignments
- feedback and interaction with other students
- adult education principles
- interactive learning

#### Learner materials

- good self-instructional materials
- computer conferencing
- assessment at the end of each unit
- clear, easy to use and understand student materials
- reflect current practice in the field

#### Personal supports and characteristics

#### Student characteristics

- good study habits
- motivated to complete
- ready to learn (scheduling and timing)
- self-disciplined
- self-directed
- confident in their professional and personal competence

## Family support

- moral support
- active support from partner and others
  - time to study

## Support from employer

- time at work to study or complete homework
- support from co-workers
- financial support

## Technical skills

- access to computer with Internet
  - at home
  - at work
- comfort on the Internet
- comfort with email
- comfort with word-processing
- using new programs for computer conferencing (eg First Class)

## Support from instructor

- answering questions about course structure
- responding to enquiries in a timely manner
- timely feedback on assignments
- knowledge of the profession and the field
- demonstrates good facilitation skills
- demonstrates good teaching skills

## Effectiveness of administration systems and processes

- registration
- admission
- financial aid
- technical help and support
- counselling and advising support during the course

- obtain interim grades
- obtaining final grades

*Most important factors that contributed to course completion or withdrawal*

What was the most important factor that contributed to your successful completion?

- Alignment of the course objectives to your career goals
- Course design and delivery features
- Personal characteristics and supports
- Support from instructor
- Effectiveness of administration systems and processes
- Other factors

Before we conclude the interview I have a few demographic questions. Your responses to these questions are entirely voluntary.

### Demographics

- Age
  - 18 – 24
  - 25 – 34
  - 35 – 44
  - 45 – 54
  - 55 – 64
  - 65 +
- gender – Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_
- Geograhic location \_\_\_\_\_
- past educational experience
  - classroom \_\_\_\_\_
  - distance education \_\_\_\_\_
  - formal \_\_\_\_\_
  - informal \_\_\_\_\_
  - work experience in this field
- work experience in total, number of years \_\_\_\_\_
- work responsibilities'
  - full-time \_\_\_\_\_

- part-time \_\_\_\_\_
  - other \_\_\_\_\_
- family responsibilities
  - spouse/partner \_\_\_\_\_
  - children \_\_\_\_\_
  - aging parent \_\_\_\_\_
  - other \_\_\_\_\_
- who is paying for the program
  - you \_\_\_\_\_
  - employer \_\_\_\_\_
  - other \_\_\_\_\_

**Are there any other comments you would like to make?**

Thank you again for your participation. I will be calling you in three to four weeks to verify that I have correctly recorded your comments and opinion. This second interview will take about 15 – 30 minutes. I'll call or e-mail you in advance to arrange an appropriate time for this interview.