

Responding to Learner Needs in Distance Education: Providing Academic and Relational Support (PARS)

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Attrition in Distance Education

High attrition² rates in adult distance education reflect, at least in part, on the inability of distance education providers to provide students adequate relational and academic support. Of course, the problem of attrition in distance education cannot be solved by only addressing institutional responsibilities. However, the solution to the problem begins there and certainly ought to be initiated by the institution since many would argue the institution has the higher ethical obligation. While recognizing that institutions and their instructors play a vital role in addressing the persistent problem of attrition, the Providing Academic and Relational Support (PARS) model places an equally high responsibility on adult learners. Tinto (1987) makes this same point when he argues that, "To single out the institution as being solely responsible for student departure, as do many critics, is to deny an essential principle of effective education, namely that students must

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² A word of clarification about terminology is in order. *Attrition* is a synonym for *dropout*, *student departure*, or *student leaving* and refers to those who enroll in a course or degree program but never complete it. *Persistence* is a synonym for student progress and is the opposite of attrition. It refers to student behavior whereby one continues to make *progress* through a course or degree program by remaining continuously enrolled. *Retention* refers to institutional efforts taken to keep students enrolled in a course or degree program. Retention rates refer to the number or percent of students who complete a course or degree program. Retention rates are the opposite of attrition rates that depict the number of students who withdraw, in various ways, from a course or degree program before completing the stipulated requirements.

themselves become responsible for their own learning." (p.181) This last phrase is especially critical for adult learners at a distance, although it should be a consideration at any level. An adult student in a distance education environment is confronted with the reality of being the only one truly responsible for his/her own learning. If distance learners have not learned how to take responsibility for their own learning prior to enrollment in a distance education program, they are at a serious disadvantage and may be jeopardizing their academic success in that institution.

Attrition or retention data for distance education courses across the country do not currently exist. Carr (2000) concurs when she notes that, "No national statistics exist yet about how many students complete distance programs or courses." Although it is difficult to obtain attrition data from institutions, there is enough evidence in the literature to suggest it is a perennial problem in adult education in general, and distance education in particular.

Historically, distance education providers have experienced higher attrition rates than traditional institutions. Kerka (1995) reports attrition rates as high as 60-70% among adult basic education programs as reported to the federal government. Thompson (1997) also makes the same assertion when she notes that, "The drop-out rates for distance education courses are usually higher than those for comparable on-campus courses." She goes on to report the results of studies at her own institution (Edith Cowan University) that show, "the attrition rates over the last four years for external students have been more than double those for internal students." Beck (2000) asserts that, "Attrition rates for most distance education programs are worse than for traditional college courses, with dropout rates as high as 80% at some colleges." She cites data from Piedmont Technical College in Greenwood, South Carolina to indicate that the "overall attrition rate for traditional classes average 25%, while attrition rates for online courses average 45%." Kember (1995) reports attrition data that range from 28% to 99.5% in distance education settings including correspondence courses that can have attrition rates as high as 70% (p. 23-24). The American Institute for Chartered Property Casualty Underwriters (CPCU) and the Insurance Institute of America reported attrition rates in their distance education courses as high as 50% (Zolkos, 1999).

Many studies in areas outside of distance education have demonstrated a relationship between the provision of appropriate academic and relational support and a decrease in attrition rates both in traditional and nontraditional institutions. The most significant variables identified from these studies that contribute to student persistence are orientation experiences of various sorts, level of commitment to the institution, early faculty contact, academic support (sometimes referred to as developmental programs) comprising a variety of strategies, learner self-confidence and self-perception, and affective support that takes on a variety of forms but in essence provides emotional encouragement and motivation to students encouraging them to persist in their academic endeavors (Turnbull, 1986; Tinto, 1987, 1990; Tallman, 1994; Gibson, 1996). As a result of this research, most traditional colleges now require freshman or first-year student orientation designed to alleviate some of the causes correlated with attrition and many have now hired full-time retention coordinators. The "first-year experience" is a major topic at seminars and workshops. The result of all of this attention is that most traditional institutions provide year-long interventions during the first year of study. Taylor University, a private Christian college in Indiana, has required orientation and other retention strategies to address the problem of attrition, and now reports 87 per cent of their incoming freshmen return for the second year. (xap.com, Undergraduate Student Plans section, para. 1)

Personal variables such as personality, motivation, age, sex, and income level have not been shown to influence attrition rates in distance education (Eastmond, 1995, p. 53). In fact, Kember

states flatly that "entry characteristics are not good predictors of final outcomes" (p. 77). The one personal variable that has been shown to affect completion rates is academic ability. However, even this finding is found to be tenuous when more mature adult students from limited academic backgrounds are included in the sample (Kember, p. 72)

Another important variable for student progress is the impact of the part-time status of most adult students in distance education programs. Generally speaking, part-time students have higher attrition rates than full-time ones. A few years ago, the Evansville Press and Courier reported that the University of Southern Indiana had a four-year attrition rate of about 70% when the majority of their students were enrolled on a part-time basis. Now about 95% of their student body is considered full-time and their attrition rate stands at about 28% over four years. Studies conducted on student attrition have found external factors, those that are external to the institution but related to the life of the student, play a significant role in student progress. With this in mind, Kember notes that "external factors become increasingly important when study is a part-time activity" (p. 47). The most plausible explanation for this phenomenon is the lack of "collective affiliation," to borrow Kember's term, or integration of the student into the life of the institution. Tinto's model of institutional departure as well as Kember's model of student progress makes provision for the integration of students into the community of the institution. Tinto notes that, "the effect of institutions upon student leaving highlights the intricate web of reciprocal relationships which bind students to the communal life of the institution" (p. 181). Those students who feel at home, comfortable, and accepted by the institution are more likely to persist than those students who feel alienated and alone.

The Effect of A Traditional Educational Background on Nontraditional Learners

While the issues just enumerated certainly are valid and legitimate aspects of the problem of attrition in distance education, the most critical ingredient has been ignored: the majority of students who matriculate into a nontraditional, distance education degree program come from traditional educational institutions. Given this reality, distance education providers are confronted with a subset of derivative issues. Students in traditional classroom settings are often not taught the essential skills of self-directed learning and learning-how-to-learn so critical for academic success in distance education. In addition, as Malcolm Knowles has taught us, these same students enter with learner self-concepts shaped by the realities of a classroom experience that taught them to be dependent and passive, two potentially fatal learner attributes in a distance education environment. As Knowles (1975) put it so succinctly, "most of us only know how to be taught, we haven't learned how to learn." (p. 14). Paulo Freire (1983) offers a similar critique of traditional education and its resultant negative affect on learners. Freire's famous "banking" metaphor aptly describes most traditional schooling instruction that is nothing more than "an act of depositing" (p. 58). Students passively "receive, memorize, and repeat" the "communiqués" issued by the teacher (p. 58).

Consequently, most students who enroll in distance education programs from traditional learning backgrounds are ill equipped to handle the unique demands of study at a distance. Yet, distance education providers treat them as if all of their previous educational experience has somehow magically produced in them the requisite skills of self-directedness and the concomitant abilities required for the organizing of one's learning, time management, academic self-assessment, not to mention computer and Internet skills. As part of the provision of adequate and appropriate institutional and instructional support, a distance education institution should assist new students to begin acquiring and developing the skills of self-directedness and the whole range of learning-

how-to-learn skills required of those studying at a distance. Gibson (1996) made this point quite convincingly in a study on the relationship between academic self-concept and persistence in distance education. She observed that,

“Analyses of the data provide support for continuing a number of already-suggested, although not widely used, practices. For example, a student orientation that introduces procedures for learning at a distance...should be provided. Instruction in the process of directing one's own learning and in study strategies also seems appropriate early in a student's program” (p. 32-33).

The critical phrase is “early in a student’s program.” The more quickly a distance education provider can begin making distance learners aware of the new learning skills they will need in distance education the more beneficial to the learner. Another study by Fjortoft (1996) found "a need for [distance] educators to help adult learners prepare for further study with self-assessment exercises and, possibly, learning-style inventories" (p. 58). One of the most comprehensive distance education retention programs was developed by Rio Salado College in Tempe, Arizona. Their three-pronged approach includes student assessment of learning needs, an orientation video, and a telephone contact program. They have seen about a 20% improvement in retention since the program started a few years ago (Case and Elliott, 1997).

Providing Academic and Relational Support

Institutions that provide education at a distance confront a unique set of challenges. The most significant of these is to provide appropriate academic (institutional and instructional) and relational (emotional and interpersonal) support for students given the constraint of "distance" that separates learner from teacher.

Academic Support. Appropriate academic support must be provided to ensure the academic success of distance education students that eventually leads to course and degree completion. *Institutional academic support* includes such elements as provision of competent and credentialed faculty, competent and knowledgeable staff, quality materials, appropriate delivery technology, and other typical human and material resources. *Instructional academic support* refers to the instructional design of courses, the interaction with faculty or adjunct faculty, tutorial assistance, and so on. **Relational Support.** Relational support describes the more affective dimension of the learning process wherein we encourage, motivate, and nurture students. The form of support being described is offered at an emotional level and attempts to strike a balance with the more intellectual/cognitive support typically provided by academic institutions of higher education. The relational aspects of learning are strongly embedded in interpersonal relationships between co-learners and between learners and instructor. These important relationships are similar in many respects to what Carl Rogers had in mind when he wrote his chapter on “The Interpersonal Relationship in the Facilitation of Learning” in *Freedom to Learn*. He argued that “the conditions that facilitate learning” are multifaceted but “that one of the most important of these conditions is the attitudinal quality of the interpersonal relationship between facilitator and learner” (p. 125). He went on to note that when such a learning climate exists it is “stimulative of self-initiated learning and growth” (p.126).

The PARS Model

The Providing Academic and Relational Support (PARS) model is proposed as a comprehensive framework to be used by distance education providers to guide administrators and instructors in the design and delivery of academic and relational support in courses as well as entire degree programs. It is also suggested as a guide to empower adult learners who are contemplating enrollment or are already enrolled in a distance education course or degree program. In addition to the two key elements of academic support (institutional and instructional) and relational support, the PARS model also focuses on self-directed learning and learning-how-to-learn skill development. All of these elements interact with one another to create a dynamic model. The PARS model is presented graphically in Figure 1.

A Model for Providing Academic and Relational Support in Distance Education

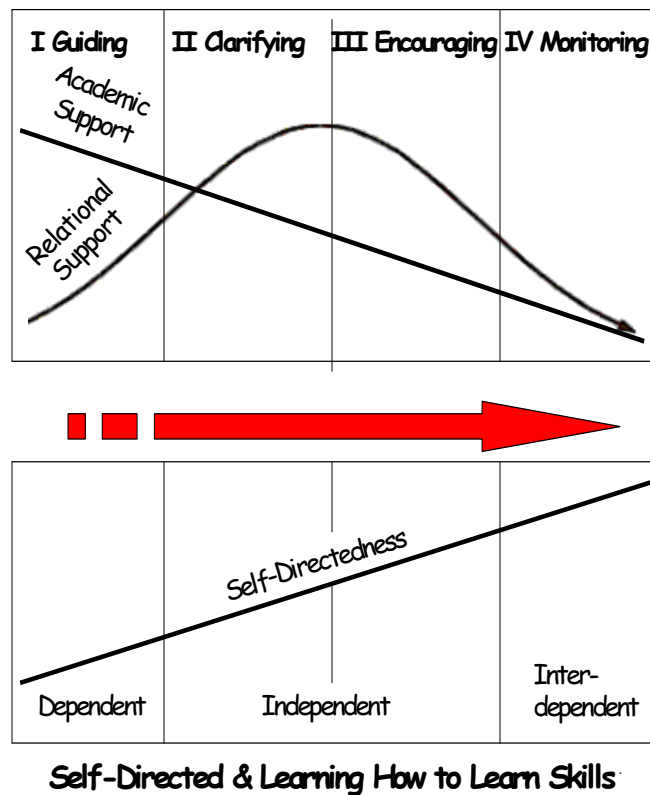


Figure 1

The PARS model recognizes and expects growth in learning maturity and so it also envisions a dynamic development of self-directed and learning-how-to-learn skills along a continuum from Dependent to Interdependent. The left hand side represents a *dependent* adult learner who is new to distance education and has been “domesticated” by traditional educational environments. The

mid-point of the continuum represents an *independent* learner and the far right represents an *interdependent* adult learner. These levels of dependence/independence/interdependence are directly associated with the academic and relational support needed by the learner, as represented by the four columns at the top of the figure. Those learners who are moving away from a dependent stage of self-directedness are in need of less unsolicited academic support and more proactive relational support. Likewise, the learner who is gaining more independence in learning skills has similarly moderate needs for both academic and relational support. By the time a learner has essentially mastered the learning skills needed for deep learning experiences they are becoming more inter-dependent and affiliative.

The model does not lock a student, teacher, or administrator into assuming that everyone enters a distance education degree program with the same academic and learning skills. It may be that a student who enrolls with some experience and expertise in learning at a distance should be treated as a Stage 3 learner and thus by-pass many of the support scaffolding provided in columns # 1 and #2. It is probably safe to assume that most adult learners entering a distance education delivery system have had little exposure to these learning skills in a formal way. Certainly this will be the case for the foreseeable future until more and more students take advantage of distance education opportunities in higher education and other settings.

There are both informal and formal ways of assessing learning skill levels. Admissions staff, alert to verbal clues offered by prospective students, can use informal assessment. Often, students who are anxious about their ability to perform in a distance education environment may often verbalize their anxiety about lack of skills to staff members in the process of application. Informal contacts may provide information about previous distance education experience that offer some clues as to whether or not a given student had previous opportunities to acquire distance education learning skills. Institutions, instructors, and students are able to formally assess self-directed learning skill abilities by taking informal assessment instruments such as the *Competencies of Self-Directed Learning: A Self-Rating Instrument*, developed by Malcolm Knowles and included as an appendix in his book *Self-Directed Learning*. Formal learning skill assessments of this kind may be imbedded in orientation experiences or in a required orientation course.

The arrow in the PARS diagram is pointing to the right and is suggestive of the developmental nature of the figure and the model. Though there are times when a learner may need to return to an earlier stage of PARS (facing an entirely new situation, taking a new course from a new instructor, dealing with unfamiliar content, etc.) the general movement is always to the right - toward enhanced abilities as a self-directing learner.

The PARS model is both descriptive and prescriptive. It is descriptive to the extent that the model realistically portrays what often transpires when students enroll for the first time in a distance education course or degree program and then progress through the course. It is prescriptive to the extent that it suggests components an institution could put in place to enhance adult learner development and facilitate course and degree completion in distance education.

Influences on the Development of the PARS Model

The PARS model has been informed and influenced conceptually by Hersey & Blanchard's "Situational Leadership Model" (1984); Pratt's "Relational Construct" model (1988); Smith's "Situational Instruction Model" (1989); Grow's "Staged Self-Directed Learning Model" (1991); Kasworm and Yao's "Stages of Teaching/Learning in Distance Education Model" (1993); Kember's "Model of Student Progress in Distance Education" (1995) and the theory of adult self-directedness propounded by Knowles (1975) and Tough (1979).

Leadership Models. Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership Model, provides a useful conceptual tool for viewing and analyzing one's leadership style. The horizontal axis of the model emphasizes leader task behavior, while the vertical axis stresses leader relationships to subordinates. Four distinct leadership styles emerge from the convergence of these two variables in relationship to the maturity or skill level (from low to high) of subordinates that forms a continuum across the base of the model. Leadership style is situational in that it depends upon the maturity level of subordinates, which is presumed to grow and improve over time. As the subordinate matures (in a variety of areas), the leader's style of relating and tasking adjusts accordingly.

The Smith, Kasworm and Yao, and Pratt models are educational variations on the Hersey and Blanchard leadership style model. Although Kasworm and Yao do not use the four-quadrant approach of Hersey and Blanchard, the conceptual idea is similar. They propose a continuum of three stages from low learner autonomy and self-directedness to high learner autonomy and self-directedness. Included in their model are task and relational roles for instructors and course designers that provide alternative ways of tasking and relating depending upon the learner's ability to become more autonomous and self-directing. Obviously, the more autonomous and self-directing the adult learner becomes, the less structure, direction, and support provided by the instructor or institution. The benefit of the Kasworm and Yao model is that it was constructed with the unique needs of distance learners in mind.

Situational Variables. The Pratt "Relational Construct" model is more obviously dependent upon Hersey and Blanchard's model than Kasworm and Yao. Pratt's model reflects his desire to highlight the situational variables that prevail in adult learning settings. He defines situational variables as "those conditions which prevail during learning which cannot be considered personal, psychological attributes of the learner or teacher" (Pratt, 1988, p. 162). According to Pratt, situational variables might include goals, content, time, cost, and audience size. He notes the role of external constraints from employers as a situational variable that could have drastic effects on student preferences for instructional delivery. Consequently, adult instructors and course designers must be aware of the fact that adult learners may prefer more pedagogical or more highly structured learning experiences at times rather than more andragogical or collaborative approaches. Therefore, he proposes the adjustment of instructional delivery and stratagems in response to adult learner preferences and needs. The teacher would function in the role of leader in Hersey and Blanchard's model and adjust his/her style of teaching and delivery to meet the needs of the student as the situation prevails. While this model might work well in a traditional classroom environment where such adjustments can be made relatively easily, it becomes more problematic for distance education delivery systems that already have pre-packaged courses designed with a particular instructional strategy in mind. But the model is useful in that it supports our notion that the adult learner grows and develops in his/her skills as a self-directed

learner and that consequently, adjustments must be made in the way in which instruction is delivered and academic support provided.

Student Maturity Level. Smith's "Situational Instruction Model" has been proposed as a way to view instructional interaction in adult education. The model comprises instructional and content components conceived along a bi-polar continuum from low to high, as well as a learner component that describes the "educational maturity of the adults" involved in the learning experience (p. 7). The educational or learning maturity level of the adult student determines the appropriate teaching strategies and content level. The model recognizes the necessity of adjusting instructional delivery to the needs and abilities of the adult learner and offers, therefore, a highly dynamic view of the teaching/learning situation.

Understanding the Non-Completer. All voluntary educational enterprises are confronted with the problem of attendance. In some settings, the problem has more to do with identifying barriers that prevent participation in educational activities. In other circumstances, the issues are not getting people to attend but keeping them for the duration of the learning activity. Attrition rates tend to be significantly higher for nontraditional, voluntary educational activities than for other more compulsory and traditional forms of education.

David Kember has proposed a "model of student progress" designed with nontraditional or "open" educational institutions in mind. Within his model he provides a helpful taxonomy of leaving types that sharpen our ability to analyze the attrition problem. He divides students into one of several discreet persistence categories that are appropriate for distance education institutions:

1. non-starters
2. informal withdrawals
3. formal withdrawals
4. academic failure
5. transfer students
6. stop outs (students who stop attending with the intention of re-enrolling)

Kember's discussion suggests that the largest percentage of non-completers in distance education are non-starters. Non-starters are students who never submit their first lesson for grading. Here we have a student who has taken the initiative to contact a school, inquire as to its degree programs or courses, concludes that what that school has to offer he/she wants or needs, makes application and pays a fee, selects a program of study and enrolls in that program, pays all or part of the tuition, receives the course materials, and then does nothing! The really nagging question is "why?" Why did this student enroll to begin with? And, why has this student not made any obvious effort to begin what he/she clearly committed to both financially and emotionally?

The educational assumption of the PARS model is that the primary barrier to completing a course or degree program at a distance is a *skill* barrier. It is not a matter of motivation because these students enter with a high degree of motivation and expectation. An institution cannot get the materials to new students quickly enough to suit them. They are eager to begin and get on with their studies. But frequently something happens between the time course materials arrive and the time students are expected to submit their first lesson. Consequently, motivation is affected by a lack of direction and knowledge. It is at this stage that most students are confronted with the

reality of distance education: “What do I do now? Where do I begin? How do I make sense out of all this? I had no idea it would be this much work!”

Typical distance education learners, who have taken all or most of their previous education at traditional institutions, are not well prepared to handle this reality. They have not been sufficiently equipped to handle the demands now being placed upon them by the distance delivery system. Most distance education providers get high marks for helping students new to distance education acquire the technical skills needed to navigate the newer delivery and learning technologies. However, most of these same institutions give little or no help to students to prepare them for the unique demands of learning at a distance. Gibson (1997) makes this point quite accurately when she observes,

“Learners often confront the need for time management and stress management skills, increased self-directedness in goal setting, adoption of strategies to successfully assume new roles and responsibilities for teaching and learning, instigation of cognitive and metacognitive strategies etc. More often than not, these are learners who have been socialized to be passive recipients of information, competing for grades on examinations that require regurgitation of factual information. They simply are not prepared to succeed” (p. 8).

Now, possibly for the first time in their academic career, distance education students must take the initiative for their own learning, know how to do their own learning organization, plan their own schedule, pace themselves, and hold themselves accountable for whether or not a lesson is done today or tomorrow. Previously, most of these learning tasks were the primary responsibility of the faculty member. Students typically had to show up and follow directions. All of a sudden, the traits of dependency that served a student so well in a traditional setting, now become a major inhibitor to student progress in a distance education environment. Consequently, students confronted with this reality most often conclude that they are not cut out for distance education and quietly shove their course materials over in the corner or set them on a bookshelf never to be opened again! Or if they are in an online learning environment they may offer some excuse or invent some emergency that needs their immediate attention.

Students in this situation are in desperate need of institutional intervention in order to avoid becoming another statistic. Early on in a student's enrollment, the institution needs to provide direction and guidance regarding the acquisition of learning-how-to-learn and self-directed learning skills. Students who have learned how to be dependent learners can also learn how to be independent and eventually interdependent learners. It is a skill issue that has very little to do with academic ability, personal variables, or motivation.

Assumptions of the PARS Model

The PARS model is based on the following assumptions regarding adult learners and the demands of distance education:

1. Most adult learners enter nontraditional distance education degree programs with little or no experience with the distance education delivery system.

2. Most adult learners enter a distance degree program with few if any of the essential skills of self-direction and learning-how-to-learn already in place.
3. Self-directed learning and learning-how-to-learn skills are essential if an adult learner is to succeed in a distance education environment.
4. Life circumstances beyond the control of the student and the institution often play a major role in student progress.
5. Adult students can grow and develop during the course of their degree program and this includes their skills of self-direction and learning-how-to-learn.
6. Adults who are given proper orientation and support to the unique demands imposed by the delivery of education at a distance will more likely complete their first course, first enrollment period, and eventually complete their degree program and do so at a high level of academic excellence.
7. Distance education institutions need a conceptual framework to guide their provision of academic and relational support.

Key Components of the PARS Model

Anyone who has served in formal education will agree that the process of learning and study is not a purely intellectual endeavor. Social, emotional, psychological, and spiritual aspects also play a vital role in understanding all facets of the academic experience. The PARS model recognizes that a variety of institutional, instructional, emotional and interpersonal variables, can and do play a significant role in student persistence. When combined, these different variables provide psychological support most students need to experience success in academic endeavors.

The model assumes a whole person or whole learner perspective that appreciates the place of both intellectual and emotional aspects of the learning process. A failure to appreciate the dynamic interplay between intellect and affect, both as instructors and as institutions, will inevitably short-circuit the learning process and attenuate the developmental progress of our students. An exclusive focus on intellectual or academic matters may lead an instructor or an institution to depreciate other equally valid dimensions of the student as person. The affective or emotional aspects of a learner have just as powerful an influence on the learning process as cognitive aspects. Kember concurs when he writes, "Any view of student progress confined to a narrow academic sphere of influence will, then, ignore one of the most fundamental impacts upon the learning outcomes" (p. 219).

The PARS model is drawn from distance education experiences that suggest that most adult learners enter distance education with few skills in learning-how-to-learn and self-directed learning and with an external locus of control. An external locus of control is a psychological state in which students perceive that persons and events external to themselves have a controlling influence over the course and direction of their life. Adult learners with this perspective have been, in Freire's language, "domesticated" by the traditional educational experience to see the entire learning experience as something that happens "to" them from the outside. Since most new students entering distance degree programs have little or no experience in distance delivery systems, they are in need of guidance to assist them in maneuvering the frequently disorienting

first experiences with a new delivery system. In effect, distance education providers capitalize on students' external locus of control but with the intention of moving them from this more dependent state to a developmentally mature state in which they assume greater responsibility for their own learning. As adult learners acquire greater facility in self-directedness resulting in greater learner autonomy and academic interdependence, they require less academic guidance or emotional support since the motivation for self-directedness and locus of control have been internalized.

Another way of conceptualizing the process depicted in the model is to borrow the language of "scaffolding" proposed by Vygotsky (1978). In the first column of the model the scaffolding is already in place, ready to provide academic support to the new distance education student in any way needed. As the student develops more and more facility in learning-how-to-learn and self-directed learning skills, the academic support scaffolding is gradually dismantled and the relational support scaffolding is strengthened. Eventually the student reaches the fourth column and both the academic support scaffolding and the relational support scaffolding are completely dismantled as the distance education participant becomes fully capable of being an interdependent learner with the appropriate self-directed and learning-how-to-learn skills in place and functioning well.

Adaptation to the growth experienced by adult learners as they develop more learning facility is essential. Teachers and administrators must adapt their style of relating to the learner and allow the growth of the learner to dictate the nature of the relationship between all parties involved.

Operationalizing the PARS Model

Column 1 - "Guiding" Academic and Relational Support. The "guiding" style of providing academic and relational support offers the novice learner as much institutional and instructional direction as the student can handle and absorb. The relationship at this stage is more like a trail guide who is not so much concerned about establishing a relationship as he/she is in getting someone safely through rough terrain. The guide does a lot of pointing and directing but very little time is spent getting close to and emotionally engaged with those being led. Certainly institutions and instructors want to be cordial and inviting in this early stage of the learning process but the focus should be on information, direction, guidance, and counsel because that is what the student, often lacking much self-direction as a learner, typically needs at this stage of the distance education process.

It should be obvious that the most critical stage in the model is located in this first column where academic support is high but in decline and relational support is low but in ascendancy. The most critical need for adult learners at this point in a distance education experience is to receive targeted institutional and instructional support that will enable them to overcome the disorientation of a new learning experience. Assuming the traditional educational experience of most adult learners who are new to distance education, both institutions and instructors need to concentrate on providing information and skill development that will enhance an adult learner's self-directed and learning-how-to-learn skills.

The guiding stage of PARS is most essential for that large group of learners who, in Kember's language, may become "non-starters." These students enroll and receive course materials and information about how to get started in an online distance education environment. However, non-starters seem to freeze at that point not knowing what to do next or seem unsure of their ability to

continue in such a demanding academic environment. For these students it is not an issue of motivation or lack of personal variables such as intelligence or ability but rather an inability to move systematically from one step to another in order to successfully complete a course. The really critical issue at the outset of a distance education experience is a need for skill intervention. Students need an infusion of academic and technical direction that can guide them through the process of assessing their own learning skills and then developing those skills that may be missing or deficient.

Column 2 - "Clarifying" Academic and Relational Support. The "clarifying" style is akin to the coaching relationship in which a great deal of teaching takes place along with a high level of emotional and affective support and encouragement. The focus is not so much on the providing of necessary new information but instead the focus is on how to help the learner understand and make use of the information he/she already has. As is shown in column 2, the need for academic support is continuing to decline. Relational support, on the other hand, has now become a major focus for the learner as he/she assumes a more independent and self-directing role.

As noted earlier, Kember and Tinto both indicate in their models the strategic importance of personal affiliation between the institution and the student. Students who persist feel as though they are valued members of the institution's academic community. In short, they have a sense of belonging and acceptance. The institution, which is represented by its staff and faculty, needs to continue some level of academic support and direction, but that support and direction must be coupled with greater affective and relational support. The role of faculty and course assessors not only includes the grading of assignments but must also involve the verbal and written encouragement needed by students at this stage of their academic and personal development. Kember refers to the attribute of "pastoral interest" in describing the relationship between faculty and students and advises that, "Even a few friendly words can mean that students will be prepared to contact a person at some later time as the need arises" (p. 204). Peer mentors, if they have been assigned, can provide valuable affective support and encouragement for the student's academic progress at this time. Part-time students, who are full-time professionals, may sense a feeling of being overwhelmed by work-related demands and course requirements. Middle-aged adult learners who are "sandwiched" between demands from teenage children and elderly parents often feel overwhelmed. Their need for some level of continued academic direction does not diminish their need for personal attention and the perspective of one who has gone through the process and survived to tell about it.

Relational support at this "clarifying" stage may take the form of phone calls, letters, e-mail messages, comments in chat rooms, or feedback notes on returned assignments. Staff members can play a vital role in providing this kind of support by offering a word of encouragement as they handle their institutional concerns. The institution and its staff must be attuned to the emotional needs of adult learners at this critical stage of their academic progress and be sensitive and caring while providing needed direction and guidance to help bring clarity to this new learning experience. Kember highlights this dimension of the model when he suggests that, "Warmth, interest and perceived competence will contribute towards a sense of belonging. Coolness, tardiness in responding, bureaucratic indifference and incompetence will all have a negative impact which is often not perceived by those responsible for engendering it" (p. 204). The PARS model may prove beneficial to such persons by making them more attuned to student needs and more sensitive in handling them.

The bottom line is this: the greater the contact and communication between learner and institution, the higher the rates of persistence (Kember, 1995, p. 206). At a more practical level, it

seems most beneficial if a student can have regular contact with one staff or faculty member rather than have multiple contact persons. This gives distance learners the sense that they have an advocate within the institution who is watching out just for them and taking care of their needs in a personal and professional manner.

Column 3 - "Encouraging" Academic and Relational Support. The "encouraging" style of providing academic and relational support is much like the role of a cheerleader. Cheerleaders cavort on the sidelines offering emotional motivation to players on the field and spectators in the stands. When an instructor or institution provides relational encouragement, they recognize the student has mastered most of the skills essential to academic success in a nontraditional setting, but may need more nurturing and cultivation than direction and guidance.

At this stage of the adult's learning development, there is considerably less need for academic support since it is assumed that the adult learner has acquired a significant arsenal of academic and learning skills enabling them to function effectively as an independent, self-directed learner. Although the academic support presented in columns # 1 and # 2 is still available, it is not a major focus of attention and not offered as presumptively as might have been the case early on, when the student's learning needs were greater. At this stage adult learners need gentle nudges toward higher levels of self-directedness since the momentum has already been generated by the array of services and supports offered and accessed earlier in the program. As students mature in their development of learning skills they display greater levels of learner autonomy and increasing self-directedness.

Whereas the need for high academic attention has greatly diminished by this stage in the adult's learning development, the need for emotional involvement continues - though also at a decreasing level. What the adult needs most at this stage are words of encouragement from both faculty and administrators. An adult learner at this stage has mastered a significant array of learning abilities and should be capable at this level of functioning in an academically acceptable manner. However, there is still some level of need to be affirmed by those who are held in high esteem by the student. Approval for what a student is doing academically is needed to encourage the student to continue a course of action in which he/she has invested heavily in all aspects - intellectual, social, emotional, and spiritual. Commitment to the institution becomes a critical factor at this "encouraging" level of the adult's journey toward degree completion, as does the student's own personal commitment to the goal of degree completion. Many studies of retention in higher education and participation in voluntary organizations have demonstrated that level of commitment plays a vital role in extent and duration of participation and involvement. The consensus of the educational and sociological literature on this subject is clear: the greater the level of commitment (as measured objectively and subjectively), the higher the rates of participation (see Lowe, 1991). Tinto places a great deal of weight on institutional commitment as one of the most powerful determinants of persistence in formal education. In part he writes,

“Institutional commitment refers to the person’s commitment to the institution in which he/she is enrolled. It indicates the degree to which one is willing to work toward the attainment of one’s goals within a given higher educational institution . . . the greater one’s commitments, the greater the likelihood of institutional persistence” (p. 45).

By providing high levels of affirmation and encouragement, the institution and its representatives help foster and facilitate institutional commitment. There is an increased level of loyalty toward the institution that is fostered in the student.

Column 4 - "Monitoring" Academic and Relational Support. The "monitoring" style is a laissez-faire approach. It is based upon the concept that mature adults who are competent and skilled at learning are no longer in need of close supervision. An institution's (instructor's) confidence in the abilities of its adult learners is demonstrated by the fact that it provides opportunities for a great deal of autonomy. At this stage both academic support and relational support are at a minimum and provided only as needed and requested by the adult learner, or as warranted by institutional constraints (graduation procedures, accreditation requirements and so on). The instructor or institution "monitors" but is not proactive. The student takes the initiative for support as it is needed. However, if institutions and instructors are not careful, the learner can misinterpret the reduction in attention. It is especially critical that learners understand the ground rules that govern the nature of the relationship at this stage of the learning process. Students need to be assured that help and guidance is available when needed but that the request for this will most often originate with the learner and not the institution or instructor. The PARS model assumes that at this final stage the student in a distance education program has acquired requisite learning skills and competencies and has received the necessary affirmations to function as an *interdependent* adult learner. Consequently, there is little need for significant amounts of either academic or relational support. This does not mean the institution withdraws and leaves the student to function alone but simply reduces the extent to which services and relationships are highlighted and aggressively offered. Developmentally maturing adult learners are capable, at this stage, of determining for themselves what help and direction they need from the educational provider. They have learned to take responsibility for their own learning. At this stage the distance education provider has created an environment in which a student can flourish academically and personally to such an extent that they require little support and direction from the institution or instructor.

Summary

The intent of the PARS model is to guide academic and relational support activity in a coherent fashion while facilitating self-directedness and academic interdependence in adult learners unfamiliar with the demands and expectations of the nontraditional distance delivery system with the intended outcome of degree completion. Any institution can "fill-in-the-blanks" of the model and identify specific strategies and services that can be provided to match the level of appropriate academic and relational support simultaneously cognizant of the adult's level of academic and learning maturity. The model enables institutions and even individual instructors to organize and plot the variety of strategies that may already be in place organizationally but which have no guiding or coherent master plan. By adopting such a model, distance education institutions enhance their own student services as well as improve attrition rates while strengthening the academic performance and learning skills of its adult learners.

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