Distance learners are expected to plan their academic programs, set their own study schedules, balance their studies with other responsibilities (work/family), communicate proficiently in writing, find and use learning resources well, and read and synthesize efficiently. Those distance learners studying in cohorts are expected to collaborate effectively with their peers in virtual groups, and those studying in self-paced courses are often expected to create their own learning networks. Accordingly, studying at a distance requires maturity, a high level of motivation, capacity to multi-task, goal-directedness, and the ability to work independently and cooperatively.

Obviously, not all students enter online studies with this set of aptitudes and skills. In response, post-secondary institutions dedicated to distance delivery of education usually have a comprehensive suite of services and resources to help learners become engaged with the institution and each other and develop the skills and motivation necessary to succeed in their studies and make a successful transition to the work place. These support services include the library, advising and counselling, academic skill assessment and development, community development, peer-to-peer support, and administrative services. These services support the learning process but do not include direct subject teaching and are the focus of this chapter.
In distance education, learner support services have been held up as critical to learner satisfaction, motivation, engagement, and success (LaPadula, 2003; Mills, 2003; Rekkedal, 2004; Ryan, 2004; Simpson, 2002; Tait, 2004). Although the literature has tended to be more speculative and descriptive than evidence-based in this regard, a great deal of attention has been paid to how to best help distance learners persist in their studies and meet their educational goals—despite the considerable demands of distance study.

Web-based technologies have opened up new opportunities and present new challenges. The use of the Internet in provision of learner support requires rethinking models of support to capitalize on the affordances of the Internet to provide new customized services and to automate services and interactions that can actually be more effectively delivered by computers than by humans (Anderson, 2004). Further, not only are institutions dedicated to distance teaching confronted by this challenge.

The availability and ease of access to essential services for the remote student may be the most challenging issue for institutions engaged in distance learning because of the significant cost involved in both developing new services and redesigning on-campus services for non-campus based students (SREB Distance Learning Policy Laboratory, 2002, p. 2–3).

Although not a significant topic in the literature, it is important to note the difference between providing support to distance learners who are in self-paced continuous enrolment courses compared to supporting learners in cohort-based virtual classrooms. Although all distance learners face some of the unique demands of studying independently and require similar kinds of support services, those who are not in paced groups studying the same subject are much more likely to experience isolation. Unlike their peers in virtual classrooms, self-paced students in continuous enrolment courses do not have prescribed opportunities for collaborative learning, for example, engaging in small group projects for course credit, or for spontaneous peer contact that frequently takes place in the virtual classroom in the form of same-time chat and subsequent e-mail contact. However, institutions with continuous enrolment and self-pacing can create opportunities for learning collaboratively by setting up shared virtual spaces for students and providing incentives for participation (Anderson, 2005). Some examples of this kind of initiative are described later in the chapter.
Despite lessons from earlier forms of distance education about the need for learner support services (Rekkedal, 2004, p. 90), institutions are generally much quicker to put curriculum online than to develop equally accessible support services. However, the progress in online learner support in the past few years is significant and the current literature is being generated from both campus-based (dual mode) and distance teaching institutions.

The first section of this chapter will consider the literature that has shaped the development of the field learner support including main theoretical insights derived from research, student satisfaction surveys and needs assessments, and models and guidelines for good practice. The following section of the chapter presents a sample of studies that address major topics of interest in the field. Finally, questions for future research are identified. Literature reviewed includes writing that has been most influential to practice, and more recent articles, and pertains only to post-secondary institutions.

THE EVOLUTION OF LEARNER SUPPORT: THE LITERATURE

The literature specifically addressing learner support services is limited relative to some other fields in distance education (Zawacki-Richter, Bäcker, & Vogt, 2009). However, if the net is more widely cast than distance education journals, there is a body of literature that has significantly influenced the field, provided a rationale for learner support models, and has led to guidelines for good practice. This literature tends to fall into three broad categories that do the following:

• provide theoretical insights (learning theories, attrition research)
• evaluate satisfaction with and/or assess need for support services
• provide guidance for learner support practice (models for learner support provision, good practices).

Theoretical Insights and Conceptualizations

Learning Theory

Early forms of learner support were course-content based and provided by an instructor or tutor, so it is natural that teaching and learning theories have
influenced the development of other types of support services. Holmberg (1989) offered the concept of guided didactic conversation that allowed the student to remain independent but be supported by an encouraging voice embodied in self-study materials and/or written feedback from the instructor. Within this humanistic model, he argues that the “conversation” enhances motivation and facilitates learning through the communication of empathy with the learner.

Sewart’s (1993) concept of continuity of concern, a tenet of learner support at the Open University, United Kingdom (OUUK), also focussed on dialogue within the learner–tutor relationship. Sewart’s primary innovation was to have the same tutor-counsellor address both non-academic and academic concerns with a given student over the student’s entire term of studies at the university. Rumble (2000) confirmed that this broader conception of learner support was heavily influenced by adult education theory and practice (cf. Knowles, 1970) with its focus on development of independent learners.

By contrast, in North America the course related support (teaching) has traditionally been separated administratively from other learner support services and carried out by specialized staff (versus tutors). However, similar to the OUUK model, the development of the latter was significantly influenced by adult education theory and, except for delivery mode, support services for distance learners resembled those at conventional institutions, typically including inquiries, orientation, technical help, advising, counseling (career and personal), library services, study skills development, and student advocacy (McKinnis-Rankin & Brindley, 1986).

Adult learning theory continues to be a significant guiding framework as learner support has evolved toward using proactive contact and scaffolding when necessary as a means of helping learners gradually take control of their own learning process. Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of shared discourse between learner and teacher, which results in a shift of control toward the learner, has been applied to other forms of support that help learners toward independence. Distance education library services have long been a model of this kind of support, not just providing access to resources but also teaching information literacy skills (George & Frank, 2004; Needham & Johnson, 2007).

Moore and Kearsley (2012), heavily influenced by adult learning principles, recognized that learners can exercise control over their learning, being
more or less autonomous depending upon their readiness and the learning context. Their theory of transactional distance is one of the most researched and tested theories in distance education and has had a pervasive impact on the conceptualization of learner support as helping to reduce the transactional distance between learner and institution and assist learners in successfully developing the necessary skills to negotiate contexts where greater autonomy is required.

Web-based technologies have enabled a more open approach to teaching, with less reliance on a structured course package and more on interaction among students and with the instructor. Within this environment, learner support practitioners have embraced a constructivist model of learning that fully acknowledges the role of the learners as active and instrumental, relating content to their own experience and participating in constructing knowledge, individually and with their peers. Enabled by technology and a learning model that values collaboration and social learning, much more attention is now being directed toward finding ways to facilitate learner-to-learner support as a way of engaging and retaining students (cf. Boyle, Kwon, Ross, & Simpson, 2010).

Predictive Models based on Attrition and Retention Research

The heterogeneity of distance learners, together with the unique demands of studying at a distance, is seen to present some challenges with regard to persistence (Gibbs, 2004). Distance education institutions have responded to attrition by trying to untangle the complex reasons for dropout and by extrapolating from this research to design retention initiatives. Attrition and persistence research and theory have probably had more impact on the development of learner support practice and theory than any other area of investigation (Bajtelsmit, 1988; Billings, 1988; Brindley, 1987; Brown, 1996; Kember, 1990; Sweet, 1986; Tinto, 1993; Rekkedal, 2004). (See chapter 17 by Woodley and Simpson for further discussion of attrition.)

One approach to investigating dropout is to use post-hoc surveys of learners who leave their studies early (cf. Bartels & Rekkedal as cited in Rekkedal, 2004). Inevitably these studies identify reasons that are external to the institution such as insufficient time for study or a change in personal or work circumstances that interfered with study (Woodley, 2004). These reasons may reinforce the need for early anticipatory guidance for new students that would help them to better manage their time and be prepared to cope with
unexpected circumstances. However, self-reports from dropouts considered in isolation from other factors often raise more questions than answers.

Brindley (1987) discovered that students who persisted experienced a similar type and number of hindering incidents (for example, a geographical move or a change in health, work, or family situation) as those who eventually dropped out. More recently, Kemp (2002) reports that, “For the most part, external commitments—in the form of personal, family, home, financial, and community commitments—were not found to be significant predictors of persistence . . . in distance education” (p. 75).

Although it is unlikely that post-hoc surveys can truly reflect the complex interplay of factors that result in a dropout decision, the results from these studies have occasionally been extrapolated to guide practice with some good result. For example, one reason that students frequently cite for dropping out is choosing the wrong course (Astin cited in Woodley, 2004). In response, Simpson (2004a) successfully demonstrated that retention can be improved when institutions are more proactive in using a combination of methods and resources to help students with course choice.

Another approach to attrition research is to develop multi-factorial predictive models that consider the complex set of learner and institutional variables that interact over time to produce a dropout decision. Early models based on undergraduates in traditional American universities have had enormous and enduring influence. Tinto’s (1975) model, the one most frequently cited, describes the beginning student as having predisposing characteristics that determine entry level institutional and goal commitment. Over time, depending upon how successfully the student is socially and academically integrated into the institution, that commitment is weakened or strengthened eventually resulting in dropout or persistence. Tinto’s model has been adapted for use with adult learners and for distance education with the predictive variables changed to match the circumstances of context and learner population (cf., Bajtelsmit, 1988; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Kember, 1995; Sweet, 1986).

Woodley (2004) concludes that the value of a “Tintoesque” framework is that it helps us to understand persistence as meaning the learner undertakes a longitudinal process of cost-benefit assessments for staying with a particular institution. According to Brindley (1987) all students meet with both hindering and facilitating incidents, some internal to themselves, some in their home or work environment, and some over which the institution has
control. Woodley points out that the latter should be our primary concern in moving forward to action.

An advantage of having conventional institutions engaged in online learning is that they bring considerable new energy and resources to the field. A number of institutions have been experimenting with learner analytics, mining data from learning management and student information systems to find the most salient predictors of attrition and retention. WCET (the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies) (2011), announced a project that combines the data sets from six institutions participating in the Predictive Analytics Reporting (PAR) Framework. The data set includes over 640,000 anonymized student records and over 3 million course level records, focussing on 34 common predictor variables for persistence/drop-out. The data will be used to explore patterns that emerge when the data sets from considerably different institutions are analyzed as a single, unified sample.

The goal of the PAR Framework is to identify demographic, pedagogical, and institutional variables that influence student retention and progression, to consider how the factors affecting dropout might differ from indicators of completion, to use the findings to inform development of strategies to improve learner engagement and support (WCET, 2011), and to better target these to specific groups and individuals. This long-term study should fulfill the expressed need for large population and cross-institutional research to obtain more accurate predictors of academic persistence. In future, data from learner analytics (including an individual profile) can be shared directly with students, putting them in a better position to be self-directed in taking advantage of support services that will contribute to their success.

Although no silver bullet has been discovered, predictive modelling has revealed most dropout occurs early during the first distance education course and certain factors appear to contribute significantly to persistence and to attrition that an institution has the potential to influence. These include finding courses more rigorous than expected, adjusting to a self-directed approach and the online environment, acquiring academic skill sets, and experiencing satisfaction and a sense of belonging (cf. Bocchi, Eastman, & Owens-Swift, 2004; McGivney, 2004). As a result, learner support approaches have become much more purposeful, proactive, and timely, focussed on early intervention, anticipatory guidance, preparedness for online study, skill development, and social and academic engagement.
Student Satisfaction Surveys and Needs Assessment

Surveys of satisfaction with support services are most often used as a measure of quality and to identify any unmet needs. While the use of satisfaction as a quality measure is debatable, satisfaction surveys have had a significant influence on the development of learner support practice, reflecting a culture of customer service, and yielding important feedback from students about how well their expectations are being met, a factor that has been linked to retention (Gaskell, 2009).

In a survey at the New York Institute of Technology, online students indicated satisfaction with current services but expressed a desire for additional services such as clubs, a newspaper, online tutoring, development seminars, and access to an online psychologist (LaPadula, 2003). This study identifies three major areas of desired services: academic advising/career counselling, personal/mental health counselling, and “services that promote a sense of community” (p. 121-23). The third, while challenging for institutions to facilitate, speaks to the need for many distance learners to feel more connected to their institution and to each other.

Dare, Zapata, and Thomas (2005) conducted a large-scale survey at North Carolina State University, comparing on-campus and distance learners as to the importance of and satisfaction with aspects of support services. The results reveal that distance learners appear to be fairly pragmatic in placing greatest importance on registration and records, library services, and advising. However, like LaPadula (2003), these researchers found a desire for additional services such as counselling, orientation, health services, leadership development, and physical facilities. Dare et al. cite demographic trends that indicate a growing number of younger students who choose to study online or combine online studies with on-campus studies, likely resulting in a greater demand for support services that go beyond meeting basic needs.

Satisfaction surveys frequently reveal low usage and/or lack of awareness of support services by online learners (Cain, Marrara, Pitre, & Armour, 2003; Dare, Zapata, & Thomas, 2005; Simpson, 2004b). Cragg, Andrusyszyn, and Fraser (2005) found that many students, even though frustrated and in need of assistance, did not make use of counselling and advising services, indicating a need for institutions to be more proactive. Students on campus often learn about services and opportunities for engagement from their
peers. The same may be true for online learners as they are provided with more opportunities to interact (Kretovics, 2003) through the use of customized portals and the development of virtual communities of students.

**Guidance for Learner Support Practice**

*Models for Learner Support Provision*

Distance teaching institutions have a history and culture of responsiveness to a diverse body of students. Good customer service has been recognized as a means toward student retention (Brindley, 1995; Gibbs, 2004). Rumble (2000) argues that in a competitive market, distance education institutions can capitalize on their expertise in service provision and systems approach to management to become exemplary service organizations. Hardy Cox and Belbin (2010) note that “students have come to expect higher levels of customer service: 24/7 online technical support, a twenty-four hour turnaround on e-mail inquiries, immediate response self-directed services, and an online ‘two-click rule’ to locate service and obtain a quick response” (p. 226). They point out, “often best practices in distance student services are grounded in a business model of customer service” (p. 231). Within a formalized educational program, customer service is still a negotiated process but in a learner-centred institution, learners are seen as active and instrumental, making choices about when, how, and with whom to seek support.

The development of integrated models for provision of online learner support that are learner-centred, use technology wisely, and offer benchmarks for evaluation demonstrates that the field is becoming more sophisticated in conceptualization of purpose. An effective learner support model is one that can be aligned to an institutional value system, goals and strategic priorities, approach to teaching and learning, and the unique and changing needs and goals of the learners served. It should provide a framework that facilitates planning, evaluation, and resource allocation.

Hülsmann (2004) addresses providing learner support in a model of education traditionally based on economies of scale. Offering more comprehensive support services adds to the cost per student, which must be justified by achievement of desired outcomes, including but not limited to improved retention. Simpson (2008) has developed a formula for calculating the cost versus benefit of learner support and demonstrates its use with a variety of specific interventions.
Tait (2004) describes a planning and management model of learner support with three primary domains (cognitive, affective, systemic), and identifies specific functions and services in each. The model is not prescriptive but rather adaptable depending upon learner characteristics and contextual factors such as geography, scale, management system, and technological infrastructure. In the 10 years since Tait’s article, institutions have made enormous progress in applying technology to improve learner support in all three domains.

In dual mode institutions, integrated models of online support services designed for both on and off campus students are now seen as providing better service for all students and as being more efficient than maintaining separate systems for distance learners (Dare, Zapata, & Thomas, 2005; Kretovics, 2003). As a result, there is growing convergence between models of online learner support between distance teaching and conventional institutions that offer online study. Three examples follow.

The Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET) model (Shea & Armitage, 2002) is widely cited as a key resource that provides detailed guidelines for developing online learner support. “One very valuable outcome of the WCET project was the creation of a graphic, ‘Web of Student Services,’ that displays the various student services recommended for online learners” (Kendall, 2005, p. 55). One student and a curriculum are at the centre of the web, representing the need to customize individual support. Five integrated suites of services for learners form the surrounding architecture of the web: an administrative core, communications and information, academic services, personal services, and student communities. There is an expandable boundary at the outer edge of the web representing the evolving nature of the field. (See graphic, Shea, 2005, p. 17.)

Ryan (2004) depicts a learner support framework as a table that lists the potential critical points of contact or need in the student life cycle and the corresponding desired response in the form of a resource or service. For each point of contact, Ryan identifies which of four types of interaction is involved (learner–content, learner–teacher, learner–learner, and learner–learning support specialist) (p. 127).

Floyd and Casey-Powell (2004) propose the Inclusive Student Services Process Model (ISSPM) to serve both online and on-campus students, based on student development through five phases of the learner life cycle. The authors identify the primary goal of the learner in each phase, the role
support plays in reaching it, the specific services to be offered, and benchmarks for quality. It notably includes “environmental management” and “fostering sense of belonging” in the “learner support phase” (p. 59), which reinforces the importance of facilitating learner-learner interaction and creating communities that promote mutual peer to peer support as described by Kretovics (2003). As institutions grapple with how to continue to provide quality support to greater numbers of students, it is likely that peer support will become much more important.

**Identification of Good Practices**

The development of best practices in online support demonstrates that the field is maturing and recognized as being a specialized professional endeavour. *Online Student Support Services: A Best Practices Monograph* (http://www.onlinestudentsupport.org/Monograph/) is an open online publication providing strategies and best practices to help institutions make the transition to online learner support services. The monograph is presented as a well-organized website with links to a wide variety of exemplary services and is continually updated. A similar resource is the online Student Services found on the website of the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (http://www.sbctc.ctc.edu/college/s_index.aspx).

Some authors have drawn from the literature to identify characteristics of learner support services that exemplify good practice. Brindley and Paul (2004) identify six essential elements of effective learner support from distance learning practice that could be applied in any post-secondary setting (p. 45), and Shea (2005) proposes 10 desirable characteristics of online student services that should shape good practice (pp. 17–19).

An innovative development is the opening in 2005 of the Centre for Transforming Student Services (CENTSS, http://www.centss.org/), an American private/public partnership offering web-based resources on a fee for service basis. The focus of their work is helping higher education institutions assess the quality of their online student services with an audit tool designed from a learner’s point of view (Shea, 2005, p. 20). The CENTSS audit covers 31 student service areas each of which is measured against benchmarks of increasingly customized and personalized levels, or generations, of service.

Preliminary findings indicate that the audit tool is useful for identifying gaps and overlaps in service. It reveals differences in levels of services
across institutions and in quality among services within individual institutions. Comparisons among institutions reveal those that redesign their student services using cross-functional teams to develop a strategic plan and those with creative staff who are eager to adopt new practices (as opposed to those with the most resources) are more likely to exhibit best practices (Shea, 2005).

**Research Articles on Major Topics in Learner Support**

A sampling of current literature is presented to represent four emerging areas of interest in learner support that are being driven by the need to use resources effectively and demonstrate accountability, respond to the increasingly heterogeneous demographic of online learners, take advantage of the many opportunities offered by new technologies, and facilitate learner-to-learner support such as that offered through communities of learners.

**Intervention Studies**

Although attrition studies often conclude with recommendations for specific kinds of support interventions, relatively little evaluative research has been done to find out about their impact, particularly in comparison to the numerous studies of the effects of instructional design, teaching methods, and technology applied to teaching and learning.

To demonstrate a statistically significant effect from an intervention study, a controlled experimental design with large samples is needed—conditions difficult to achieve in single institution studies. Use of control groups is rare because institutions do not want to withhold services intentionally, and documented evaluation studies are rarely replicated, making it difficult to generalize from findings. However, the value of small intervention studies should not be underestimated. They yield useful information and, taken together, help build the field of knowledge and contribute to improvement of practice.

Some researchers are successful in employing larger samples and experimental designs and building a valuable body of work over time. Simpson (2004b) reports that OUUK students who received an early proactive supportive telephone call showed higher course completion rates at the halfway mark and at the end of the course than those who did not. In a cost-benefit analysis, he concludes that, based on the cost of the call per student versus
the cost of replacing a dropout with a new student, proactive interventions are worth the investment.

Simpson (2004b) introduces the concept of “maximum possible increase in retention” (p. 82), and recommends using predictor variables to target interventions for students most likely to benefit. Although targeting interventions raises an ethical issue of withholding services from students without knowing for which student interventions will make a difference while also not informing students that they have been targeted because they are seen as vulnerable (Kelly & Mills, 1997). This line of research holds promise as learner analytics become more sophisticated and predictor variables more accurate.

Based on his work with proactive support, Simpson (2008) proposes a new theory, Proactive Motivational Support (PaMS), which applies concepts from motivational theory and positive psychology to proactive contact with learners that helps them identify and apply their strengths to learning. A similar study based on social support theory, using an experimental design to compare the effect of proactive contact on students new to distance learning, also found that the intervention had a positive effect on student satisfaction and intention to re-enrol (Brindley, 2000) but showed no significant difference for persistence.

Intervention studies indicate that students respond positively to proactive contact from institutional personnel but the nature of the mediating variable, if any, is not clear. Timing of contact is less ambiguous. Frydenberg (2007) found no differences in attrition and persistence rates between online and on-campus students, but a significant difference in the pattern of attrition with online students dropping out very early. This is consistent with many studies that reveal that when distance learners drop out, they usually do so early in their first course, indicating the need for early contact.

**Learner Characteristics and Changing Demographics**

Research on learner characteristics is covered in chapter 16. However, three trends that have significant implications for learner support are noted here.

First, many institutions with online courses and programs are enrolling students from beyond their borders and must be prepared to respond to cultural and language differences (Spronk, 2004). Bray, Aoki, and Dlugosh (2008) summarize the challenge for institutions with a global reach:
There is a greater need for understanding of the approaches to learning required to support students from other cultures in order to “get the mix right” and to avoid projecting false or stereotypical images onto them or ignoring important differences. (p. 2)

Secondly, pressure on public institutions to widen access has resulted in much greater diversity in the student body, challenging them to provide a wide variety of support to meet the needs of learners under-prepared for the rigour of online learning (Gibbs, 2004). Thirdly, a similar challenge is presented by the increasing number of young students who are choosing online study for its convenience and familiar and attractive technology but who may not have yet developed the self-directedness and maturity required for success (Kelly & Mills, 2007). The increasing use of assessments of readiness for online learning as self-help and advising and counselling tools (cf. Hall, 2011; Pillay, Irving, & Tones, 2007) reflect the growing concern about students embarking on online study without the prerequisite skills.

How much responsibility lies with the institution to help students succeed and how much lies with the student is an open question. However, given an intentional widening of access and that grants to institutions are dependent upon enrolments and graduates, there is pressure to minimize dropout and maximize success. Perhaps more importantly, institutions that value openness and social justice have an ethical obligation to ensure those who have been invited in are provided with the best opportunity to succeed (Kelly & Mills, 2007).

Using Technology Effectively

Anderson (2004) discusses the need to capitalize on the affordances of new technologies in rethinking how best to provide student support. Kvavik and Handberg (2000) provide a case study of how their institution redesigned their entire learner support system, automating straightforward transactions, and retraining staff to provide one-on-one service to students who require individualized service for complex interactions. Rethinking current practice is an important first step for any institution, but web-based and mobile technologies can also be used in innovative ways to accomplish what was not previously possible, such as providing customizable portals, creating dynamic virtual communities of learners, and helping students develop new skills and think in new ways.
Mobile applications work with web-based systems, making institutional information, administrative services, and even the library, portable. The North Carolina State University library now offers a mobile application that provides catalogue searches, information about computer availability in labs, and access to a reference librarian (http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/m/about.html). However, innovative use of technology can accomplish more than access. The critical transition is the one between making generic information available on web pages and providing information customized by the individual through a portal. Steele and Thurmond (2009) draw parallels among Bloom’s taxonomy, the DIKW (data, information, knowledge, and wisdom) processing model from knowledge management, and the learner support conceptual model provided by CENTSS (described earlier) to demonstrate how web-based services with higher levels of performance can facilitate higher levels of cognitive processing by students. An example might be a student learning how to customize her portal so that data are gathered and synthesized for applications such as running a degree or financial aid audit. Learner analytics (using existing data sources to construct predictive models) not only inform institutions in the development of targeted interventions but can also help learners make more informed decisions about using support services. (See chapter 8 by Conole for further discussion of learner analytics.)

Steele and Thurmond (2009) point out that use of smart technologies allows students to self-serve. This, in turn, frees advisors to focus on direct interaction with students and the development of additional resources (such as interactive FAQ sites).

New technologies show promise for serving greater numbers of learners, offering more self-directed and customized services, providing service quickly when needed, and possibly assisting students to become more independent and self-aware. However, technologies are expensive and can also have unintended consequences. Strategic planning and research and evaluation are required in order to use technology most effectively.

LEARNING COMMUNITIES AND PEER-TO-PEER SUPPORT

Somewhat ironically, improved efficiency in the form of online administrative transactions and self-service probably contribute to a sense of
anonymity, making efforts to create a social atmosphere for online learners that much more important. Web-based technologies offer unique opportunities to facilitate learner-learner contact (Dare, Zapata, & Thomas, 2005) that can provide the important social component of belonging to an academic community, facilitate peer-to-peer support, and teach critical skills of collaborative online learning (Anderson, 2003; Stodel, Thompson, & MacDonald, 2006, p.18). Kadirire (2007) reports that the instant messaging capability of various mobile devices that have been enhanced for interaction and collaboration makes these effective tools for online community building.

Kretovics (2003) argues that learner support staff have the expertise and responsibility to facilitate campus communities, whether in person or virtually. Student portals can be customized to “push” information according to individual interests and linked with social media to foster communities of common concern. Using a campus ecology model, he highlights the importance of including online learners in institutional life, pointing out that, “distance students are essentially commuter students who use a different vehicle” (p. 2).

Some institutions have student governments for distance learners (e.g., OUUK, Washington State University, Athabasca University) that help students identify with their institution and promote loyalty. Peer support and study partner programs, shared virtual spaces, and social networking sites such as blogs, message boards, and chat rooms, operate at a course, program, and institutional level. Excelsior College New York hosts the Electronic Peer Network as a way for students to interact on social and academic matters, and Washington State University has the Studio Café and the Speakeasy where students “can chat, work on assignments together, and get new insights about their ideas” (LaPadula, 2003, p. 123). Using ELGG, an open source social networking engine, Athabasca University (AU) created The Landing, a virtual space for students to share profiles, discuss ideas, blog, and create e-portfolios (Anderson, 2005). In the context of an institution such as AU, which has continuous enrolment and self-pacing in many programs (versus cohorts or classes), creating virtual spaces for learners is critical to facilitating spontaneous and student-initiated networks and study partners.

Boyle Kwon, Ross, and Simpson (2010) report on three studies using peer-to-peer mentoring support, two of which showed a higher rate of persistence of mentored over non-mentored students. Self-reports from
students in the third study indicated that they found a mentor useful and helpful in numerous ways. The authors noted that there is significant staff time involved in setting up the matches between peers but that the cost per student for peer support is significantly lower than a staff member making a proactive telephone call (as per Simpson, 2004b), reinforcing the notion that peer-to-peer contact will be used increasingly as a cost-effective method of providing support.

For learners outside of formal institutions, such as those taking advantage of open courseware or joining a MOOC, peer support in the form of a study buddy or learning group can be critical to deepening the learning experience. Kamenetz (2011), in her guerrilla guide for those who wish to learn outside of an institution, recommends forming or joining a peer support group, noting that there are many active online learning communities for almost any subject area. Informal online study is becoming much more common and may offer models for developing and sustaining learning communities that can be used within institutional settings.

**DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The research agenda in learner support reflects current and future challenges as identified in the literature reviewed in this chapter. Four major areas for investigation are identified: targeting investment for greatest effect, capacity building, learner support as a professional practice, and fostering student to student support. These four areas are presented in the form of questions and sub-questions and address the most pressing issues.

1. Which investments in learner support make the most difference?

   Should the focus continue to be on skill building and community building to engage students and offer a sense of belonging? Which interventions make the most difference and with which learners? Which technologies are the best investments to meet learner support needs? How can learner support models be improved to provide frameworks adaptable to different contexts? Which theories hold the promise as frameworks for design of these models? How can learner analytics and other large data base studies (e.g., PARS, CENTSS) inform theory and practice? Are there ways to demonstrate the effectiveness of learner support interventions and use of technologies in meeting intended
outcomes? To what extent is it possible to help students who are not ready for online learning become ready, and what are the most cost-effective methods for doing so?

(2) How can institutions build learner support capacity to address the diversity and volume of demands?

If only very large or very well resourced institutions have the human resource and technology capacity required to offer customized student portals, 24/7 library and technical support services, academic advising, and learner skills development such as a writing centre, what is the best way for medium and smaller institutions to serve their learners equally well? Can these services be cost effectively outsourced without loss of effectiveness? Is collaboration across institutions a good solution for service provision (Wang, 2005)? How can institutions collaborate to offer better service to their students without losing their unique identities? In the face of finite resources and students who lack the requisite skills and aptitudes for distance study, how much responsibility does an institution have for preparedness of their learners? Is this a pragmatic issue or an ethical issue (cf. Kelly & Mills, 2007; Needham & Johnson, 2007)? How can institutions calculate the maximum percentage of increase in retention in order to set realistic goals for what learner support can accomplish (Simpson, 2004b)?

(3) How can the field of online learner support be strengthened?

Can professions in learner support be better defined with specific required competencies and improved professional development programs (cf. Dunn, 2005; Mishra, 2005)? How can professional practices, research, literature, and open support resources for students across conventional and distance teaching institutions be developed and shared?

(4) What are the possibilities for building dynamic virtual communities of students?

What attracts and motivates students to engage critically with peers outside of the classroom? Can peer-to-peer support be part of the solution to capacity building? How can institutional enthusiasm for development of communities be balanced with students’ needs for
independence and flexibility? Is there a way to build the social component of learning in a virtual environment? Are there ways to create a sense of belonging, loyalty, and pride in one’s institution through creation of particular kinds of communities? What can institutions learn about how to facilitate online social learning from activities that are going outside their walls (cf. Kamenetz, 2011)?

CONCLUSION

Support systems for distance learners have become more proactive, more purposeful, and more effective in helping learners succeed in their studies. Learning theories, attrition and persistence research, service models and guidelines for good practice, an increasingly diverse learner population, student feedback, evaluation of interventions, and new technologies have all been powerful in shaping the field toward its current focus on learner preparedness, skill development, and learner engagement with the institution and peers. The development of models of support that are learner-centred, apply technology effectively, and offer benchmarks for evaluation, and the investment in large studies such as the Predictive Analytics Reporting (PAR) Framework and new initiatives such as the Centre for Transforming Student Services (CENTSS) speak to the recognition of the essential role that learner support has in a quality online educational experience. However, providing learner support to those who study online is still a relatively young field and the opportunities for research and development are many.

REFERENCES


