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**A TRANSITION BACK TO SCHOOL:
THE NEEDS AND EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN
AS THEY BEGIN DISTANCE STUDY IN CAREER PROGRAMS**

Stephanie Anne Miller

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Education

**Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

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ABSTRACT

A Transition back to school: The Needs and Experiences of Women as They Begin Distance Study in Career Programs

Stephanie Anne Miller

This qualitative study was conducted to determine the experiences and needs of women making a transition back to school. Through a series of telephone interviews, twenty-five women disclosed information about their perceptions, preferences, motivations and feelings, as well as their characteristics as they initiated this significant decision to return to school with OLA. They also described their study environments and indicated their needs for information and support during this transition.

The findings revealed two distinct groups of respondents: those with clearly defined career goals, and those without clear goals. Further analysis indicated that there was clearly a link between having clear goals and one's persistence to study. The respondents' lack of information about careers and themselves in a career coincided with unclear goals and with a decision to stop studying. It was also discovered that these women studying at a distance most preferred to look to their familiar environments and known relationships as sources of information and interaction during study, and for emotional and tutorial support as they studied.

These findings revealed as well that the early stages of this transition were stressful and disruptive, and that many respondents lacked confidence in themselves at this time. Within this educational setting, these findings support the literature on transition which says that a transition begins with a great deal of uncertainty, instability and lessened confidence.

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INTRODUCTION

Education has traditionally been a way of preparing for a future career. Of late, it has grown to include a way of dealing with and effecting changes in an existing career on an on-going basis or of changing careers. These purposes of education reflect the transformation which society has been undergoing. In the workplace alone, the look of work is changing, as a result of the introduction of new technologies, the reorganization of business, the different types of business and economic realities. In addition, changing expectations and preferences in roles, particularly for women, have led to a marked increase in the numbers of women in the workforce. Many women are turning to school as a way of coping with or effecting these changes. In fact, adults are returning to school at a greater rate than ever before. Among those in the traditional college population, numbers of mature students have doubled between the years 1970 and 1982, with the greatest growth of adult students being women (Steltenpohl & Shipton, 1986; McLain, 1980). What we are seeing, however, is that at the same time as women have been fostering careers and upgrading their education, they have simultaneously been maintaining their traditional role as caregiver of a family, frequently alone.

Distance education reflects this trend in growth and in the demographics of its students. Although studying at home has been an option for over a hundred years, the ongoing creation of new institutions of distance education and open learning reflects the growing popularity of distance learning (The Open University in Britain, the FernUniversitat in Germany, the Indira Gandhi University in India, Athabaska University in Alberta, Téléuniversité in Montreal and the Open

Learning Agency in B.C., to name a few). Not only are far more people choosing to study by distance, by it seems, too, that far more women than men study through: open learning.

The Open Learning Agency (OLA) is the setting of this study. It was created in 1978 as the Open Learning Institute mainly to provide adult learners outside metropolitan B.C. with access to post-secondary education. Over the years, OLA has grown to include metropolitan as well as rural B.C., and is now made up the Open University, the Open College and the Knowledge Network educational television programming. OLA has become a significant part of British Columbia's post-secondary educational system, offering more than 400 different courses via distance education to 22,000 students in 1991 (Bates, 1991). It offers courses and programs varying from adult basic education and undergraduate degree and college certificate programs, to professional development. Students progress at varying paces, taking differing course loads. The majority, however, take one course only, or one course at a time. The figures for the 1991 year indicated that only 4% of the students registered for three or more courses, with most (85%) enrolled in one course only (Black, 1992).

OLA's records reflect the trend of growing numbers of mature adults, particularly women, who are returning to school. During the last ten years, it has more than tripled its enrolment, and in the 1990-1991 year, it reported that three quarters of its students were mature adults over twenty-five, and sixty-two percent of them were women (Black, 1992). Similarly, in a study of the student population of Ryerson Polytechnical Institute's Open College in Ontario, Robinson (1992) showed that 46 percent of the students were between the ages of thirty-one and forty-six, with female students making up 78% of enrolment.

Unfortunately, many women and men are subsequently dropping out of school, and few institutions of learning are really clear about why. In 1990, The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada established a Commission of Inquiry to look into the state of Canada's universities. As a result, the Commissioner reported an unacceptable attrition rate, especially during the initial year, or the transitional period, of university (Bates, 1990). Within distance education institutions, the dropout rate is even greater than traditional institutions. The OLA reported that in the 1989-1990 year, 6 percent of its registered students formally withdrew from their courses, and 49 percent did not complete course requirements. That totals well over one-half of registered students who discontinued, many for unknown reasons (OLA, 1992).

From the diverse information available regarding the event of adults returning to school, one thing is clear. By returning to school, they are necessarily going through a transition - from a familiar way of life, to a new situation that includes participation in school. They are making a change. We have quantitative data about the students as they enrol, and similar data about them as they leave, successfully or not, but we have little valid data about the what happens in between. What is happening with them as they go through this transitional process? What interferes with their success? How prepared were they for the experience? What information about their characteristics or circumstances is relevant to this issue? What do they believe they need to succeed? What assumptions are we making about their intentions and preparedness?

With the steady increase in women returning to school, we can assume they wish to improve their situations, but we require a better understanding of their circumstances and needs in order to respond more astutely, and help them succeed. This study contributes to the knowledge we have

With the steady increase in women returning to school, we can assume they wish to improve their situations, but we require a better understanding of their circumstances and needs in order to respond more astutely, and help them succeed. This study contributes to the knowledge we have about the situations and needs of women making a transition back to school, particularly those registered in career programs at OLA.

A needs assessment was conducted to provide this information. As a fundamental tool of educational technology, a needs assessment provides a holistic, systematic way of determining, not only what learners believe to be the needs directly related to their learning, but the indirect influences to their learning within their environment. Before proceeding, it is worthwhile to clarify the meaning of need as it is applied here. The concept of need has been used in the literature in a great variety of ways, often generalized and imprecise (Tennant, 1985). Abundant studies have looked at educational needs, felt needs, real needs, prescribed needs, wants and demands. Questions are posed about whose needs are really being assessed, who perceives the needs, the magnitude of needs and how needs will be assessed. Tennant (1985) defines need as "a 'want' or 'demand' which is deemed to be worthy of satisfying. Needs are thus value-laden. They require a judgement by someone about the relative merits of satisfying different wants or demands" (p.9). Clark (1986) and Monette (1979) agree that needs can never be value free. They "are not mere empirically determinable facts; they are complex value judgements" (Monette, p.84).

Within educational institutions, learner needs have been traditionally prescribed from the value judgements of the educators, who employ a marketing approach to their programming (Moore, 1979). Seldom do the students, the receivers of the program, have input. Yet there is a growing belief that a program built on the needs prescribed by educators alone is not valid. Moore (1979) refers to a publication of the Advisory Council for Adult and Continuing Education, Links to Learning, which emphasizes the importance of the learner's perspective in program planning and development. "If we as a society and as providers of adult education want to encourage participation and reduce the dropout rate, we must be aware of individual needs and the barriers adults face" to participation (p.12). This research presents the learner's needs from the learner's perspective.

Abbreviations for the three programs, and the career certification will be represented in the report as such:

SSW	Social Service Worker Program
FAW	Financial Assistance Worker, certification following SSW program
DENT	Dental Assisting Program
CDA	Certified Dental Assistant, certification following DENT program
BUS	Business Skills or Office Skills Programs

Background information about the three programs can be found in Appendix 3.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although there is ample literature regarding the needs of distance learners, much is limited to their support needs, leaving a dearth of research on the subject of their information needs. Furthermore, very few take the perspective of returning to school as a transition in one's life, and little is related specifically to women's experiences. We can get fragmentary insights into this issue, however, by isolating and examining its three components: Transitions/Change, Attrition/Drop-out and Distance Education.

I. Transitions/Change

A great deal has been written recently on the topic of change, probably since society, organizations and individuals have, of late, been undergoing unparalleled changes. Aslanian & Brickell (1980) state that one in every three Americans is experiencing a career transition at any given moment in time. In fact, "it appears to be for many people in the world, a rapid acceleration in the number of transitions encountered in all aspects of living - greater mobility, more job change, shorter-term relationships, rapid technological change, retraining, continuing education, more discretionary time, etc." (Hopson, 1981, p.36). Alvin Toffler (1970), in his book Future Shock, restates this notion, suggesting that we are one of the first generations to go through what he calls "exponential change". In fact, he fears that "change is avalanching upon our heads and most people are grotesquely unprepared to cope with it" (p.12).

Change is a process through which something or someone is altered or made different. It is a movement from a present state to a new state, yet to move from one state to another, "targets

of change must pass through a transition state, a period of high insecurity and ambiguity in which people are 'unfrozen' from their current ways of thinking and doing things and are drawn into a new frame of reference" (Smith, 1989, p.3). It is only recently that any studies have elaborated on the concept of **transition** as an integral part of change. Transition is seen as that 'in-betweenness' within change that lies between an ending and a new beginning , between loss, which is a fundamental issue of change, and newness (Bridges, 1980).

Several researchers look at the process of personal transition, breaking it into stages. For instance, the topics of "adult life-span development" and "life events framework" reflect the personal change processes which individuals undergo within a variety of life events (Neugarten, 1979; Sheehy, 1977; Sanguiliano, 1980; Gould, 1978). Aslanian & Brickell (1980) present transition as a 5-step cycle, based on the work of Kubler-Ross (1969) who examined emotional and psychological changes in dying patients. They suggest that most personal transitions begin with shock, self-doubt and resistance, accompanied by a high stress level and a tendency to avoid the discomfort and uncertainty. With success in coping, one reaches a point of shifting perspective and one becomes future-orientated. An adjustment in perspective takes place, whereby goals and plans are clarified and developed, and one moves to the point of adapting to the change.

Other researchers focus on the components of transition, suggesting that transition has a multivariate nature. The interaction of both individual characteristics and external influences produce different reactions to transition (Schlossberg, 1981; Mercer et al., 1989; Bridges, 1980). They point out some common effects of transition, including indications of instability and uncertainty during the early stages of transition. At this point, individuals report a lack of self-confidence or feelings of inadequacy and may show resistance to letting go of the former way (Mercer et al., 1989). There is agreement in the literature that one of the most predominant characteristics of a transition is emotional stress, tension or anxiety (Schlossberg, 1981; Dyer, 1976; Spanard, 1990; Boshier, 1973). Spanard (1990) cited a study by Apps (1986) who revealed that 90 per cent of respondents reported stress as a major barrier to completion of studies.

Given the complexity, the diversity and the ambivalence of the factors within transition, Schlossberg (1981), presented a comprehensive, clear look at these components within a dynamic and interactive model. This representation of transition categorizes and catalogues those variables which various researchers have found to influence an individual in transition. Schlossberg has grouped the factors into three categories, which she contends, interact to bring about either adaptation or failure to adapt to change. One group of factors pertains to characteristics of the transition itself, such as role change, one's control over the change, and its effect on him or her. Another group of factors relates to the environment in which the transition takes place, and encompasses both interpersonal and institutional elements. Characteristics of the individual undergoing the transition is the third set of influencing factors

in transition. Schlossberg asserts that "different variables have difference salience depending on the transition and the group (or individual)". What is significant, is "how the transition fits with an individual's stage, situation, and style at the time of the transition" (p.5). Clearly, then, given the variability of the influencing factors, adults will differ in their internal reactions to change, in their skills and abilities to adapt to change and in the strategies used to manage the transition. Furthermore, Sargent & Schlossberg (1988) assert that "the more the event or non-event alters an adult's roles, routines, assumptions and relationships, the more he or she will be affected by the transition" (p.58). What we are witnessing is many adults who find it too difficult to make a change, or who may be unable to cope, without the information, the skills or the support needed to manage with the transition. Faced with resulting stress, many give in to a desire to cancel the change effort (Dyer, 1976). In the case of adult reentry to school, this may be displayed in dropout behaviour.

Drop-out behaviour takes on added meaning when we realize that the initial decision to reenter school is, in a large majority of cases, a way of dealing with another life change. In fact, two different studies found that around 85% of learners described changes in their lives as their reasons to return to school (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980; Schlossberg, 1981). Attending school is a means for dealing with this change, not an end in itself (Spanard, 1990). Failure to accomplish this transition back to school, then, means more than missing an opportunity for study or credit. It means failure to effect a life change through this chosen effort.

Researchers and practitioners interested in transition, are pointing to the requirements for coping successfully with transition. These conditions can be summarized into two general areas of need: support and information. There is a great deal of research that substantiates the effectiveness of support during the transition process (Brammer & Abrego, 1981). Schlossberg (1981) notes, "research indicates that interpersonal support is important - even essential - to successful adaptation (to change)" (p.10). The literature suggests that social and emotional support is provided institutionally by peer groups or informal networks. This is an understatement. In society today, we are witnessing a burgeoning movement of self-help groups with a mission to provide social support in many diverse situations. In the U.S. alone, more than 50,000 such groups today are dedicated to assisting people through various personal transitions. "The self help or peer group has been the most spectacular development in the human services of the last decade" (Brammer & Abrego, 1981, p.32).

Within distance education, such support is provided institutionally at the Open University in Britain. An essential component of the Open University is a series of some two hundred and sixty local study centres, which are invaluable in providing a variety of support for students during the transitional phase of reentry to school. Among other things, these centres provide opportunities for human interaction in learning, encouragement of self-help groups and a discussion arena, as well as providing a wealth of information about local resources, other educational institutions and business and industry (Sewart, 1982). One invaluable human component is provided by the tutor-counsellor, who works closely with each student to provide advising, counselling and tutoring assistance. Tutor-counsellors are assigned students and connect frequently with each of them at the study centre, in their homes and/or by telephone during the foundation year. During this

critical initial year, they are able to build up a relationship with the students that becomes a valuable link in later years when face-to-face contact is drastically reduced.

The need for information is the second area of need for those going through a transition. Schlossberg (1981) believes that "the greatest degree of stress and negative affect (in managing a transition) is connected with uncertainty" (p.9). In the case of an adults' reentry to school, uncertainties may include one's own needs, capabilities, wants and interests, what to expect of school or a particular course, or, a field of study and its application in the workplace. Providing abundant information, however, is not enough to deal with the uncertainty. "...To confine guidance to giving information is to assume that people are able to find the information they require, to understand it, and to relate it to their needs; all (of which) are questionable assumptions" (Beswick, 1987, p.53). Individuals in transition, particularly those experiencing a great deal of newness or great change, may require help in defining their needs for information and in finding the appropriate resources to meet these needs.

II. Attrition

Attrition in education, or the more common term, 'dropout' behaviour, has been examined by several theorists over the past several years. Most theories have been built upon the work of Kurt Lewin (1948), who proposed that a person's behaviour is a result of the interaction

of that person with others and with his or her environment (Gibson & Graff, 1992). Lewin's work influenced Boshier (1973) and later, Patricia Cross (1977), who concluded that participation in education, or withdrawal, is a result of the interaction of both internal psychological variables and external environmental variables. That is, dropout behaviour is a result of many variables of different weights that interact to produce this complex notion called attrition.

The most widely tested and cited theory of attrition recently has been a model advanced by Tinto (Ethington, 1990). This theory assumes that "persistence/withdrawal behavior is largely a function of the students' commitment to the institution and to (its) educational goals, as well as the students' integration in the social and academic systems of the institution" (p.279). There is doubt, however, that this theory can be directly transferable to mature students within a distance education setting. This scepticism is based upon some fundamental differences between the students within each type of institution and between the types of institutions themselves. Tinto's research was based upon studies with young adults entering a college environment, usually immediately after high school. The educational setting was a traditional one, characterized by face-to-face teaching and student interaction. Tinto found, and others have confirmed, that this clientele seeks social integration into this environment (Tinto, 1986).

Typical participants in distance education, however, are mature adults with a variety of life experience, returning to school after some time away (Sewart, 1982). One fundamental difference between these students and the young adults entering college is in roles. For the young adult entering college after high school, the primary role is that of student. The mature student, on the other hand, has multiple roles, the primary ones being external to the educational institution, lying within the family and/or the workplace (Spanard, 1990; Apps, 1986; Bean &

Metzner, 1985; Sewart, 1980). This was corroborated in an OLA study that showed the difficulty of many respondents to pigeonhole themselves into a role, as asked on a questionnaire. In fact, only 17% of the respondents actually considered themselves "students" (Black, 1992).

Another difference is that within distance education, (and within continuing education in general) the student is typically attending part-time (Sewart, 1980; Spanard, 1990). Within distance education, 'part-time' is difficult to define, but it seems to reflect the courseload size and length of study per course, relative to a traditional institution. Another factor making Tinto's model difficult to apply to distance students has to do with the educational environments. Distance education, by definition, involves a separation of teacher and student, as well as a separation of students (Keegan, 1980). Communication occurs through tutor contact by mail and by telephone and there are seldom opportunities for fellow students to meet. Although Sweet (1986), in his attempt to validate Tinto's model in distance education, likens social integration to tutor exchange, some researchers believe this comparison is inappropriate (Spanard, 1990; Bean & Metzner, 1985). They argue that the needs for social integration, for most adults, are already met within an external social network, and thus, most do not seek it within distance education. Furthermore, they find that the social impact of family, work and social life outside school has more bearing on attrition than social integration within.

Some research in distance education recognizes the need to provide new students with opportunities and resources to deal with adjustment and orientation issues, concerns which reflect the beginning of a transition. Most of these studies point to the initial provision of pertinent information as the single most successful defense against dropping out (Kember, 1989; Steltenpohl & Shipton, 1986; Seidman, 1991; Astone, et al, 1989). To be effective, then, solutions

for managing transitions within distance education should be anchored in an ecological framework, involving both interpersonal support and availability of pertinent information (Sewart, 1980).

These, and other, investigations of attrition have been undertaken primarily through quantitative research methodology, particularly a survey. Questions have been raised, however, regarding the veracity of such instruments in identifying the "real" reason for drop out (Cross, 1977; Rekkedal, 1985). Cross doubts that participants always reveal the actual reason they did not complete their course or program. She suggests that respondents readily admit the socially acceptable reasons like time and cost barriers, but are reluctant to admit to the socially demeaning or more personal reasons. These reasons might be an inability to understand, resistance from a spouse, or the immense difficulty of managing all roles at once. "Few people like to say that they are not interested in learning or that they lack confidence in their ability. Thus the "real" importance of dispositional barriers is probably underestimated in the survey data" (p.24).

III. Distance Education

Distance education is an option to conventional education for many students. While maintaining high academic standards, it can remove some typical barriers of access for students. By providing flexible scheduling and pacing and by removing geographic and physical constraints, it seems to offer an optimal avenue to pursue further education. So why is the attrition rate so much higher in distance education than traditional education?

One explanation may lie in the fact that the process of learning at a distance is generically different from conventional education, as previously noted. "The swift feedback available from the face-to-face learning model is almost entirely absent. The supportive environment of the peer group is lacking and the bench mark of achievement and, deriving from this, the maintenance of the individual's confidence, is difficult to establish" (Sewart, 1982, p.11). In addition, independent study demands certain conditions to be successful, primarily that its learners be self-directed. This does not seem to present a problem since adult education literature stresses the principle that adult learners are self-directed learners (Knowles, 1970; Smith, Aker & Kidd, 1970).

Reality shows, however, that many adult learners in distance education **do not succeed**, and Spanard (1990) refers to Feuer & Geber who argue that there is a "consistent overestimation of an adult's readiness to be self-directed" (p.326). Most adult learners have had only traditional educational experiences. They may not know how to respond to a non-traditional system like distance education, nor are they necessarily prepared. Furthermore, many learners **wanted** explicit direction; they were not yet interested in being self-directed (Robinson, 1992). Tough

(1971) even questions whether adults are competent and thoughtful enough to diagnose their problems and needs for learning and concludes that adult learners may need help in this area, especially at the beginning of the learning experience.

METHODOLOGY

I. Choosing Descriptive Research

As a result of my own experience of returning to school as an adult, comparable tales from my fellow students, my background in adult education and my interest in adult life development, I chose the topic of an adult's reentry to school as a focus of research. I had become aware of the difficulty with this major change event for many adults, and as a topic of my thesis study, I was interested in knowing more about this experience for women. After much reading, I concluded that a clear picture of this event was not reflected in the literature. Therefore, with the help of a researcher at OLA, I narrowed my interest, and thus my topic, to women returning to school with OLA. I wanted to know who they were, what their experiences were like, and what they perceived as their needs for support and for information.

Having had instruction in quantitative research methodology only, I did not even consider an alternative methodology to carry out my study. I proceeded to plan a quantitative study, particularly a questionnaire/survey which would give me some numerical scores denoting a degree of importance, an extent of satisfaction or fulfillment, some frequencies of particular issues among respondents, identification of causal relationships and some comparisons or ranking of needs. After a great deal of planning, talking and thinking, however, I concluded that statistical research was clearly inappropriate for my question. In the first place, I would have had to base the content of the study on previously recognized understanding of the experiences and needs of adults returning to school, of which there was some deficiency. I would have had to presume that these experiences and needs existed in my population, and then ask questions about them.

This approach left no room for new information, and could not adequately answer my question. Clearly, I had to change my question or change my approach.

I changed my approach. I therefore had to find a way of discovering, without prejudice, what the experiences of returning to school were like for these women, and what **they** felt to be their needs, without leading questions and without a cafeteria-like selection of answers to choose from. This meant taking a qualitative research route, and compelled me to learn about it. My choice of methodology for this question was endorsed in the literature which confirmed that "the paramount objective of qualitative research is understanding, rather than the ability to generalize or the identification of causes and effects" (Merriam, 1988, p.16).

I soon discovered that many educational practitioners and researchers agree that there are certain objectives, problems and conditions which clearly necessitate a qualitative approach (Merriam, 1988; Patton, 1990; Whitt, 1991). Referring to the work of a number of researchers in education, Whitt (1991) concludes that in many situations, "conventional social science assumptions and quantitative methods are not sufficient [or, in some cases, appropriate] to the task" (p.406). We must be careful not to limit our research to those needs and issues easily measured and enumerated.

II. Study Methodology

Beginning with my research question, "What are the situations and perceived needs of mature women making a transition back to school within distance education?", I set out to design an exploratory study of women entering career programs at OLA, taking a perspective of a transition.

A. Research Design

The Interview

Mayer (1985) suggests that it is important to consider three variables when selecting a needs assessment technique: accuracy and validity, or the extent to which we are confident that data collected accurately describes the real needs, as well as time and cost. Regarding the issues of time and cost, I clearly had limits, logistical, personal and institutional, and I included these factors in my selection of an approach.

On the first point of validity, I was reminded of doubts regarding the veracity of a questionnaire in determining needs (Cross, 1977; Cummings, 1985). In a study of student drop-outs at the O.U., Woodley & Parlett (1983) noted that large percentages of respondents to a survey cited domestic factors and lack of time as reasons for dropping out, yet they question these responses. They argue that there is great scope for response bias, particularly if there were hidden reasons respondents were unwilling to give. "Many researchers feel that the reasons given by respondents tend to be rationalizations. It seems likely that students...(may) explain away academic failure by referring to other external pressures such as lack of time" (p.8).

I was interested in getting to the real needs as determined by the respondent. I felt that to do this I had to connect with the individual personally, to develop a trusting environment, to put myself in a position where I could express sensitivity and understanding, verify my comprehension, and avoid the semantic limits of a questionnaire or a strictly structured interview. To meet these conditions, I therefore selected a standardized open-ended interview as the means of data

collection. This interview offered the ability to develop rapport between myself and the respondent. It would also allow me to probe for information and to formatively evaluate comprehension of this two-way conversation, rather than to assume that messages were accurately received.

The interview guide was developed with constant focus on my original question. Attention was given to the wording of questions, making them clear and directed to the intended audience. They were sequenced in a logical order, with transitional statements added to enhance the conversational tone of the interview. Probing questions and summarizing statements were interspersed where appropriate. The interviews were presented to each respondent in the same sequence and basically the same wording. According to Patton (1990), adherence to the guide for all respondents is meant to "minimize variation in the questions posed to interviewees. This reduces the possibility of bias that comes from having different interviews for different people" (p.281).

Although the guide was followed for each respondent to maintain consistency and control, it was not followed strictly, since I felt there was a need for some flexibility and spontaneity to promote disclosure of any new information. I gave respondents the latitude to be candid and to offer additional information which they felt was appropriate and important. At the same time, I deviated as required to re-word questions for clarification or to avoid misinterpretation, to address contradictions, to probe limited answers and to further explore any responses which might seem doubtful, incomplete or misinterpreted (Blase, 1987; Whitt, 1991; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Miller, 1991).

My approach was successful in clarifying my questions and respondents' replies. Several times, it became clear that not everyone comprehended a particular question in the same way, such as when an answer did not fit the question. At these times, I rephrased the question until I was satisfied that the respondent understood me. To ensure my understanding of responses, I often paraphrased a response until the respondent made a comment indicating that I understood. I used words like, 'What you're saying then...' or 'It sounds like...', until respondents confirmed that I understood. Verifying responses during the interview was valuable in substantiating my interpretation of their experiences and their feelings, particularly when these interpretations were used later for coding the interview data.

Establishing rapport with the respondents was an important consideration of mine in conducting the interviews in order to increase the validity of responses (Blase, 1987). At the same time, I was aware of the need to maintain neutrality. Patton (1990) explains this somewhat nebulous concept. He explains rapport as the ability to convey respect and caring for the individual speaking and to impart empathy and understanding while reserving judgement of that person. In this respect, I believe I was successful. The most striking example was my interview with Grace in which an evolving rapport demonstrated her trust in me and led to increased openness and honesty. Early in the interview, I asked her to tell me about the fact that she was not studying at this time. Her initial response was disjointed, guarded and referred to the time constraints of studying three courses at once. As rapport built over the interview, she divulged her distressing employment situation and her difficulty in finding her "niche". Later, she revealed confidential problems with finances, and proceeded to relate several differing accounts of her struggle with social assistance and a student loan. She slowly disclosed her dilemma with the conditions of social assistance regarding study. "If I decide to go back (to school) and if I do

need help from social assistance..there is no thinking about it, they will just cut me off...(I could lie) but if I get caught, I'm cut off." With each iteration, she became a little more open and honest about her circumstances and her decisions.

Neutrality refers to the interviewer withholding his or her thoughts, opinions and feelings about what is said. Upon review of the tapes and transcripts, I discovered that, in this respect, I departed from a neutral stance in some instances. Most of those times, this departure took the form of short statements such as "Yes, I think you're right", or "We're not all the same, are we?" During my interview with Phyllis, however, I allowed the discussion to move too far off target.

Respondent: "I'm trying to encourage people for the rest of my life to do it earlier (to decide on a career)...Don't wait until you are in your thirties."

Interviewer: "Yeah - I have my own thoughts on that, because this is something I went through myself. That is why this is such an interest to me."

Respondent: "What do you mean, your own thoughts?"

Interviewer: [I proceeded to tell her about how I got back to school, and I ended up telling her],
"You said you totally had no skills, and yet the experience and people skills that you bring are just invaluable."

The result of this digression and offering my opinion may have influenced the kind of information which Phyllis chose to reveal to me from that point. That is, she may have shaped her responses

with the purpose to please me, to hide something from me or to contradict me. In that way, my negligence lessened the validity of her responses henceforth.

In addition to the interview guide as the tool to collect the data for this research, I realized that I, as the interviewer, was an influential tool as well - a 'human instrument' (Whitt, 1991). Kuh & Andreas (1991) believe that "the integrity of qualitative data depends on the competence of the data collection instruments - human beings. That is, the data are only as good as the qualifications of the inquirer" (p.402). These requisite qualifications include knowledge and skill in the methodology, familiarity with the setting and issues under study, strong listening and interviewing skills, empathy and an ability to draw out unexpressed thoughts or feelings (Whitt, 1991; Kuh & Andreas, 1991; Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Although difficult to assess, I believe that my education and experience in adult education as well as my personal experience with this matter, attest to my familiarity with this issue and substantiates my credibility. In addition, skills training and experience in listening and interviewing have provided a strong basis for conducting the interviews, although in the example above, my ability to remain neutral was lacking .

Based on the literature of transition, attrition and distance education, it became clear that a woman's experience of returning to school and her resulting needs could not be segmented into separate isolated factors. The literature reflected the complex and interrelated nature of the variables which played a part in this event. Thus, the development of questions was structured around a holistic framework, involving the students' environments, their perceptions, feelings and attitudes, as well as their perceived needs for information and support. "Holistic thinking is central to a systems perspective... (which) is becoming increasingly important in dealing with and understanding real-world complexities, viewing things as whole entities embedded in context and

still larger wholes" (Patton, 1990, p.78). An item pool was developed from the literature for inclusion in the interview guide, and was sequenced from how respondents got started back to school, to their study now, to their goals for study.

A draft interview guide was developed and assessed by academics, after which it was revised, reassessed and revised again. The final draft was then pilot tested on three students studying through open learning, in order to get feedback on my interview technique, the clarity of my responses, the sequencing of the questions and the length of the interview. The instrument was revised accordingly.

A copy of the interview guide may be found in Appendix 1.

B. Data Sources

I was fortunate that OLA agreed in allowing me access to their records as well as offering me initial tutorial and administrative support, and access to facilities from the research office. Through them, records were extracted with the following description:

Female

24 years and older

Highest previous education equal to:

Grade 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, or high school graduation

Registered in course(s) during the sessions from 1992.09 - 1993.07

Academic goal is equal to:

-Social Service Worker

-Dental Assisting, or

-Business Programs:

-Office Skills Certificate

-Business Skills Certificate

-Management Studies Certificate

-Management Studies Diploma

I had originally planned to select only those who had registered very recently, with the assumption that the transition would have been fresher in their minds than in those who registered further back. Since the records showed too few students who had recently registered, I took the suggestion of expanding the range by searching records backward until we had an acceptable size to choose from. A chart follows which details, by program, the numbers contacted, and the numbers who responded.

The question of sample size was not answered clearly, and sometimes not at all, by experts in the field of qualitative research. Patton (1990), however, offers the most comprehensive discussion of this issue. He begins by stating that "there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry", somewhat like the quandary of a student wanting to know how many pages is appropriate for an essay. The response: "Enough pages to do justice to the subject - no more, no less" (p.185).

In search of some guidelines, then, for my sample size, I proceeded to learn that the sample size should be based on the information that is desired and the purpose of the study, and that the size is adequate when no new information emerges (Patton, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For instance, if one is seeking information covering a wide scope of a topic, a larger number of respondents would be required than if one was seeking depth of experience. "The validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information-richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size" (Patton, 1990, p.185). I found it useful to heed Lincoln & Guba's advice to "terminate (the interviews) when no new information is forthcoming from new sampled units; thus, (designating) redundancy (as) the primary criterion" (p.202). As it turned out, repetition of information was emerging after about fifteen of the interviews had been conducted, but to verify my observations, I proceeded to conduct interviews of all twenty-five who responded. Because of the selectivity in respondents, this is not a random sample. This does not distort the data collected, but rather limits the findings and conclusions to the situations, contexts and people in the study, rather than providing the ability to generalize the findings.

Registration: Number of Students by Program		
<u>Program</u>	<u># Currently Registered</u>	<u># of Respondents</u>
Social Service Worker Certificate	42	14
Dental Assisting	43	9
Office Skills Certificate	7	1
Business Skills Certificate	1	1
TOTALS	93	25

Table 1 - Registration by Program

C. Data Collection Techniques

One important consideration of OLA, which is reflected in the literature, is the ethical concerns of such a study. Confidentiality and honesty are vital, both ethically, and to invoke honest responses (Whitt, 1991). OLA insisted on protecting student anonymity unless and until the student agreed otherwise. Thus, they would not release names nor any personal information about students without their written permission. In the initial letter of request, as well as at the time I scheduled the interviews, I openly and honestly stated the purposes of my research, reiterated my commitment to confidentiality, and reassured respondents that the taped interviews would be used by me only, with the exception of the stenographer, and for the stated purposes only.

In July, 1993, a letter of request (Appendix 2) to participate in this study was sent from me, through OLA, to all students with the previous description, totally ninety-three students. A consent form was included to be signed by those agreeing to participate and to be returned in a self-

stamped, self-addressed envelope. Once consent forms were received, names, addresses and phone numbers were forwarded to me. I immediately called each respondent to set up a time for the interview which was convenient for the student. After about three weeks and eighteen responses, OLA sent out a reminder from me to all who were originally contacted, since it was reasonable that summer holidays and commencement of public school might interfere with responding.

Since most of the participants lived outside of the local telephone network, OLA offered me space at their site where I could access the participants by long-distance telephone, and where I would have a private space to conduct the interviews. Interview questions were not sent to students ahead of time. I wanted to avoid any possibility of students planning their responses to please me or OLA, or to evade any issues. I wanted answers to be spontaneous and honest to increase validity of the data. In my letter of request, I simply stated the general purpose of my research and kinds of things I was looking for.

Taped long distance calls were conducted at OLA or from my home, at a time which was convenient to each respondent. This usually meant very early morning or later in the evening. Since people are more relaxed in familiar territory (Hammersly and Atkinson, 1983), I called them at their homes and at time of their choice. With the belief that relaxation and comfort can assist the rapport and openness of the conversation, I spent time at the beginning of interview to create a comfortable climate. I used informal, lighthearted language to set the tone, and implored respondents to say what they felt was important as they wished. I reiterated my intent to tape record the conversation, and explored any uneasiness in that or in conducting the interview itself. Through reassurance in confidentiality and offering them the option to change their minds, I hoped to mitigate any discomfort from the beginning. All respondents agreed to the taping. At the end

of each interview, I offered each participant a summary of my findings, to be forwarded when the study was complete.

The first twenty-one interviews were transcribed verbatim from the tapes by a court stenographer and provided to me in 'Word Perfect' format. The last four interviews were transcribed by me. Each interview then, was in three formats, including an audio tape, a soft copy in 'Word Perfect', and a printed hard copy. Following receipt of each transcript, I checked for accuracy by going through the hard copy while listening to the tape, and making amendments as required.

D. Data Analysis

Data from this study was analyzed inductively, allowing patterns and concepts to emerge. Fundamental to this approach, is the development and assignment of codes, or categories for important themes, issues or characteristics. These codes facilitate the interpretation of the data. Conastas (1992), in an effort to develop a much-needed framework for category development (or coding) within interpretive research, suggests that the principle decision-making elements include temporal designation and the components of categorization.

During Data Reduction

Temporal issues direct attention to when these codes are established: a priori, before the inquiry takes place, iterative, at various points during the inquiry, or a posteriori, after all data has been collected. Although Miles and Huberman (1984) favour iterative coding of the data, as interviews are conducted, I did not begin coding until **after** all data had been collected. I did this to ensure reliability of the instrument, by not influencing my interview technique for subsequent interviews. I did not want to risk that I might prompt responses to comply with what I had thus far discovered. I did however, take notes as I was interviewing and immediately afterwards. These were notes consisting of remarks, insights and my impressions regarding the interviewees, the information received and my own performance. I did not look at these notes again until all interviews were complete. A second consideration of codification deals with the components of categorization (Conastas, 1992). These issues include the sources of a category (Origination), the grounds for a category (Verification) and the names of a category (Nomination). Codes for this study originated from the literature on transition, distance education and attrition. After initial coding

was done, copies of one transcript representing a typical comprehensive interview, and a list of thirty-one codes, were given to two practitioners in the field, who performed first level coding independently of each other. These were a woman and a man who own and operate a private school which deals with similar reentry issues for women. This triangulation, or inter-analyst reliability check, was conducted to ascertain the consistency among the three of us in coding that transcript (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1984). The results of their coding and mine showed only minor differences among the three sets of categories. The main difference was in identifying the category 'the reentry process'. Whereas I used this code several times throughout the transcript, these practitioners used the label very few times. In lieu of this particular code, they used codes representing different aspects of the reentry process. Since I did not brief them on the particular perspective I was taking - that of a transition- this is understandable.

Other slight differences related to codes which were similar, such as self-esteem and self-confidence, or work habits and the study process. In addition, I tended to code my paraphrased quotes when they were confirmed by the respondents that they were accurate, whereas the practitioners coded the students' responses only. It was interesting to see that both the female practitioner and myself picked up comments related to roles much more frequently than the male practitioner, probably due to our experiences as women juggling several key roles at once. In only two instances did a practitioner notice something which I missed. It is believed that this general consistency of coding increased the validity of codes I assigned (Patton, 1990).

Although names of categories were established at the time the codes were first assigned, they were changed somewhat, following the inter-analyst check and a subsequent review of the coding process, to more accurately reflect the concept. This was the case, also, in naming the two

emergent groups. Early in the analysis, it became evident that there was a division of respondents into two groups. Although there were clearly differences, it was a lengthy and thoughtful process to name these differences. Originally, I saw Pausers and Continuers. Returning to the raw data, however, showed me that these individuals were within a range of pausing or continuing. Some had clearly stopped, some were proceeding slowly, some were waiting for enough funds, and others were progressing as quickly as they could. Clearly, these were not the best descriptors. I renamed the groups the Time-outs, to reflect a decision to 'think about it awhile', and the Persisters, but upon rereading the data, I was still uncomfortable with the names. I knew there was a distinctive difference between these groups, so I studied the data again. I finally realized that the difference was not reflected in their decisions to study with OLA, but in the clarity of their goals. Hence, I renamed the groups the Focused and the Indecisives.

Coding of data was performed by means of a computer program, developed by a systems analyst. In addition to coding, this program provided subsequent retrieval of the volume of data collected. The program manipulated the data and data relationships that were maintained through 'dBase IV'. Using this program, data from the transcripts was grouped by each Question/Answer set into a data record. Each record was numbered to expedite retrieval of specific data, and had spaces for the input of four codes/categories and a separate space for researcher's comments. I proceeded to go through the data, frame by frame, entering categories and adding comments, if any. I then recorded and reviewed all codes to standardize them, finally ending up with thirty-one categories/codes. I subsequently returned to the raw data to add or change any of the revised codes.

At this time, I realized that the program I was using was not capable of synthesizing the data the way I wished. The developer then undertook to alter the program. A revised program was put into place, but it compelled me to again review the raw data, placing key words where appropriate. I did this without reference to my former choices of codes. The unintended value of this second independent iteration was that I was able to compare for similarity of coding. I discovered that in almost all cases, I used the same or similar codes for the text of the transcripts for both iterations. The results of this intra-analyst reliability check further demonstrated reliability of the coding (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1984). In those cases which were obviously different, I gave extra thought to the most appropriate code. For the most part, differences involved those responses dealing with similar student characteristics, such as self-esteem and self-confidence, or whenever complicated answers were given. This rethinking process gave me further assurances regarding my choices of categories. As was mentioned previously, transcripts of one interview were given to two independent practitioners who agreed to establish codes for this data, providing an inter-analyst reliability check.

A review of the thirty-one key words made it obvious that some key words were actually sub-headings of others, and that further grouping was necessary. This exercise meant going through the raw data again, and regrouping according to a more consolidated set of codes. Returning to the raw data again helped me to verify my selection of codes. A still further iteration of the raw data was conducted to verify selections of this final set of categories and to identify superfluous material. Each effort increased my familiarity with the respondents and with the data in context.

Once I was satisfied with the final codes, I called up the file of each participant, reducing the data under each category to short statements. This resulted in what Patton (1990) calls "thick

descriptions" (p.430) of each participant in context, written in an anecdotal and descriptive manner, with verbatim quotations. I ended up with twenty-five such within-site files containing all the applicable categories for each participant. These resulting files were later used to write profiles of each student.

I then called up the data by sub-category. For each participant under that category, I synthesized the raw data into concise phrases or sentences. This yielded a cross-site file for each category, with information from the participants regarding this code. Direct quotes which were important and which captured the meaning of an issue were identified by the record number, and were easily retrieved by calling up that record number. Aware that successive states of data reduction also meant losing information, I constantly went back to the original data to confirm meaning at each point of further reduction.

After data reduction

Once data had been adequately reduced, I developed one large matrix of all reduced data, by participant and by category, to facilitate analysis. For the purposes of presenting the findings, categories were further grouped under three major headings: The Transition, The Person and The Study Process. Frequency tables were created, by program and by group for the various categories and sub-categories. This was a way of describing findings and to reassure myself that certain claims were not purely intuitive. Patterns, discoveries, differences and similarities were noted and reported in the Significance of the Findings.

III. The Sample

The following profiles were compiled using the within-site files containing information about each participant, and OLA information files. The primary focus in drawing up the profiles was to create a descriptive sketch each participant, in context, including her circumstances, characteristics, her experience of returning to school, and her plans. Each participant was then given a pseudonym to protect her anonymity.

A. Profiles of Focused

BONNIE

Bonnie completed a secretarial course in college seventeen years ago, and proceeded to work in the general area of social services. At the same time, she was married and bringing up a young family. Now, at thirty-four, she is a single parent and beginning school once again. Although she had wanted to go back to school for some time, she was motivated this time for financial security reasons. With a diploma and certification, she feels she would have more job opportunities and better pay.

Her interest in the Social Service Worker program is obvious. She has been increasingly involved in community activities all her life, to the point of serving often as a board member. She has been on social assistance and has worked with those on social assistance. Her work has taken her to the North to deal with Native issues, into family court and to community summer programs for children. She has been a foster child and had fostered children herself. She also grew up

beside a mother who had similar involvement. Not surprisingly, she was drawn to this field and has developed a great sensitivity to its concerns.

Bonnie gives the impression of being a bright, assertive young woman, but she found her re-entry to school to be overwhelming. It was difficult to get into reading texts again, and she constantly checked her answers and the meanings of words. This slowed her down considerably. As she progresses, however, school is fitting nicely into her life. Her children are grown, and having been laid off recently from her job, Bonnie has more time to study. She has no doubt that this is the field she wants to pursue; she is only concerned about which specific area to concentrate on. As we talked, she was excited and felt ready for this. Bonnie likes studying with OLA but is concerned about finances. As we ended our interview, she concluded that she would probably just "get a student loan, and get it over with".

EMMA

Emma moved to British Columbia from Ontario several months ago with her young family. She left a career in geriatric health care, a occupation which became both physically and emotionally draining on her. After settling in B.C., she made a decision to return to school for two main reasons. A risky pregnancy was preventing her from working for at least eight months, and she was eager to leave the exhausting career she had been working in. The timing was perfect.

Emma is a confident, determined young woman, committed to gaining her certification as a Social Service Worker. She clearly knows her skills and their value in this new, yet similar, field of work. As a result, she believes she would find this career fulfilling. She intended to complete the

program entirely with OLA, attracted to its flexibility in adapting to her home circumstances. She has had difficulties with open learning, however, in that she is a procrastinator. She is therefore constantly struggling to be more disciplined while studying at home. By researching the job market on her own, and persisting in solving her problems with OLA, Emma shows that she takes full responsibility for this educational undertaking. She is a hard worker, striving for good marks, and considering further education in the field once she has worked in it for awhile.

CORRIE

After caring for a young family at home for several years, Corrie got a yearning to work toward a career for herself once the children were in school. She had done a great deal of thinking about different fields of interest, concluding that she wanted to be helping people, to be useful. She narrowed her choices through career counselling. Social work surfaced as a good choice, not surprising to her since it had always been in the back of her mind. At thirty-two, Corrie decided to enrol in the Social Service Worker program, preferring OLA because it fit her circumstances better than any other institution. With two young children, she would need a sitter to study elsewhere. She went into the program absolutely sure that she would finish it, planning to complete within a year.

Because study through open learning fits so well into her life, it has not had a disruptive effect on her family life. Personally, however, this transition back to school has been overwhelming for her. She was totally unprepared for study. She found it difficult to retain large amounts of information and she was distracted by events at home. Having worked solely at home for so long, she found she had lost a great deal of confidence in her abilities. She is determined to gain

it back, however, by working hard to prove to herself that she is "not as stupid as (she) thought (she) was". With the support and help that she has gathered around her, she feels sure that she will succeed.

ERIN

Erin has two major roles in her life. She works full time in an RCMP office and she is a student, finishing the prerequisites for the Social Service Worker program. She is a forward thinker and has made clear plans to attain her certification and work for the Ministry of Social Services. She had previously managed an office of the Ministry and was exposed to most aspects of the field, liking it very much. At forty-one, she is on her own again, and accepts full responsibility for her support and financial needs, the latter of which is her greatest concern. In terms of support and help with course work, she is reluctant to impose upon her tutor. Instead, she has built a strong support system for herself from which she draws both help with course work and emotional support.

Erin made a stressful transition back to school eight years ago, so was somewhat aware of what to expect this time around. At that time she challenged her lack of self-confidence, and began this learning experience with determination and confidence. She is having trouble, however, adjusting to study alone, preferring to move to a college setting where she can get the interaction she needs.

GAIL

Gail's eight year career as a courier ended abruptly with a devastating hand injury which left her with what the Workers' Compensation Board (WCB) termed a disability. At twenty-eight years old, she is forced to consider career choices which would accommodate her injury. Through a retraining program with WCB, she chose to follow the Social Service Worker program with OLA with a goal to become a Financial Assistance Worker.

Her choice was not ill-considered. As a youth, she had worked in a hospital and she admits she has a "soft spot for the elderly". In addition, she has worked for years as a volunteer at the crisis centre in town. Here, she deals a great deal with the mentally ill, admitting that it is hard work, but infinitely rewarding to know she makes even the slightest difference. Gail investigated this career thoroughly. Her experience at the crisis centre brought her in contact with social workers, and she gained a different perspective of their role through the clients themselves. She also checked out the field through many family members and friends, and is satisfied with her choice.

She described her transition back to school as "hell". After ten years out of school, she faced a lot of adjustment, confusion and difficulty. The confusion over course requirements led to initial frustration, but she also found it difficult to study again. After years as a courier, she was used to absorbing a lot of information, only to discard it an hour later. She found herself following this same pattern while studying for assignments. Through this struggle, she ended up seriously questioning her intellectual ability. Independent study was difficult for her too. She easily procrastinated and lost concentration with distractions at home. This was compounded by bitter

feelings about her injury and thoughts of stressful events around her, including impending bankruptcy. Her greatest challenge is to become more disciplined, and to keep herself motivated.

KATE

Kate is married and works full time as a clerk in an office of the Social Services. During her two years on the job, she has been exposed to the different jobs in the field of social services and has dealt first hand with the clientele. After looking further into the jobs, she made up her mind to be a Financial Aid Worker, a position for she would be qualified with graduation from the Social Service Worker program. Since she works directly in this field, Kate knows well what to expect of the program itself.

That was not the case of re-entry to school. Until she began this program with OLA, Kate had not been in school for almost twenty years, when she completed her high school. Her experiences then were negative, since school was not important to her. Now, at thirty-six years old, she is finding the transition to school quite difficult. New in the program, she finds she is lacking study skills, has difficulty disciplining herself to study and often doubts her responses to assignments. Basically, she just has trouble "getting back into it" all. Being committed to complete this program, she seeks her own support from former co-workers and pairs up with another student taking the program. Although she is concerned that her lack of discipline might impede her success, she believes that her strong determination to get the position at work will overcome it.

MEGAN

Megan had been working in a dental office four days a week for nine months when she began her studies in the Dental Assisting program with OLA. She is twenty-six years old and realizes she needs certification in this field to ensure greater job security. She chose to study with OLA, since the local college offering the program had a waiting list, and she intends to get her credentials as quickly as she can.

Megan finds that her whole life during the week is filled with work and study, but she takes her weekends off to spend time with her fiancé and his family. Although it took a bit of reorganization at first, she finds this schedule manageable and distance education, convenient. Initially, Megan worried about what to expect of course work and exams, but having gone through one course successfully, she can anticipate the demands and requirements. She particularly likes working in the same field that she is studying. "I don't think I could actually take the correspondence without actually working in (it)...because at least if I don't understand something, I just sit down with my boss ...and he explains it". She is somewhat worried about completing all the courses and keeping up her grades, but she has the advantage of being determined and confident.

DORIE

Dorie has worked full time in Social Services for eight months and cares for a family at the same time. Her involvement in the field led to her desire to advance in this field through further education. At thirty-nine, she is enrolled in the Social Service Worker program at OLA, attracted to its structure which allows her to continue working and caring for a family. She plans to become

certified as a Financial Assistance Worker and work for a few years before branching out to another career in this field. She planned her career path carefully and thoroughly. Although she had thought about this program for a long time, making the final commitment was difficult for Dorie. It was intimidating for her to actually send in the registration, knowing she would then be committed. She had taken incidental workshops now and then through her work, but the OLA program meant on-going study over several months.

Her re-entry to school meant a great deal of adjustment in her life. Adding school to an already busy life meant one more pressure. In addition, she found that she lacked study skills and a realistic picture of the amount of time it takes to complete the courses. She had higher expectations of where she would be at this point and was disappointed that her progress was prolonged. Dorie believes that upon re-entry to school, some guidance is very important. She sees this in the form of some basic counselling "from a human voice" and an introductory welcome call from the tutor. Having gone through the initial weeks into this program, Dorie feels that she now has the knack of it. It helps that she loves learning and gets a boost of self-esteem through her academic accomplishments. She is also pleased to be working in the same field that she has chosen to study. "I'm not sure I would have ever thought of pursuing it if I hadn't gotten right in there and mucked about a bit."

LINDA

Linda is thirty years old and in the process of completing the prerequisites to the Social Service Worker program with OLA. She chose this program after having worked in the field previously, and she knows she can contribute. Linda lives in a small town caring for her young family which

take priority in her life. She does not work outside the home. Besides juggling her roles as wife, mother and student, she is faced with financial needs as she attempts to complete her studies. Her greatest challenge by far, however, is dealing with the emotional and psychological effects of past experiences with her learning disability. I have an indelible impression of Linda as a passionate determined young woman, with a love of learning and a strong desire to be successful in her life. She accepts full responsibility for herself and her circumstances and works very hard to overcome her difficulties. She is committed to completing her program.

Linda made a transition back to school as an adult four years ago in an intimidating classroom setting at North Island College. She unsuccessfully attempted an English course three times, finally withdrawing out of sheer depletion of confidence, lack of tutorial support and hurt pride. A lifetime of repeated, devastating failures as a result of her learning disability has left a damaged self-confidence and a fear of failure. It took a lot of courage to attempt school again with OLA. Linda proceeded nervously, not knowing what to expect and struggling with her difficulty with English. She is extremely reluctant to ask for help, even from her husband and tutor and cautiously approaches only those whom she implicitly trusts. These are people she knows well, who respect her, and who would not undermine or humiliate her. She rejoices in the relative anonymity that OLA offers.

Fortunately, OLA also offers flexible pacing, giving her the time she needs to learn and the ability to manage all her roles. The supportive people around her and her consistent progress are slowly giving her renewed confidence and hope. A constant concern, however, is that she will be unable at some point to overcome her obstacles and that she might fail again.

MANDY

After eighteen years working as an uncertified dental assistant, Mandy is motivated to acquire her certification so that she will be eligible to do all that the job requires. At thirty-eight, she works full time and cares for her family. After putting her family first for years, she intends to focus on her own needs this time, making school a priority in her life. It had been ten years since Mandy was in school, attempting a dental assisting program such as this one. At that time, her life was stressed and she was pushed by her dentist to complete. Instead, she quit.

Before embarking on this effort, she gave it a lot of thought. She knew what she wanted and had clear plans for getting it. She is also very committed to completing the program. This transition back to school, however, is difficult for her. The newness of the experience, her fragile confidence and not knowing what to expect, makes her very nervous about the re-entry. Her greatest concern is that she might be unable at some point to overcome her problems with confidence and self-discipline. She wants so much to succeed, though, that she is planning contingencies should an obstacle threaten her continuing. She coaches herself along the way and plans to proceed cautiously, taking it a step at a time.

SANDRA

Sandra is a unique contributor to this study in that she is just finishing her Dental Assisting program. Her name was selected because she was indeed new to OLA. The fact is that she had followed this complete program via distance education with the Northern Institute of Technology ten years ago. This institution subsequently sold its records to OLA. Since that time, Sandra has

worked full time as an uncertified dental assistant. In order to take on more responsibilities, she wanted her certification, and so approached OLA. She discovered she needed only two courses to graduate.

Although it has been ten years since she attended school, Sandra has had no problems returning to school. With an in-depth knowledge of the career, the course work was easy for her. She is thirty-seven years old and her family is no longer young and needing constant attention. She has the time, then, to devote to study and work for this short period of time. She is also a bright, determined and confident woman who "felt as though (she) sailed through it without any hitches".

LEAH

At thirty-three, and working in what she calls a dead-end job, Leah is moved to explore further education as an alternative to being stuck in this situation for the rest of her life. Having gone back to school a few years ago to finish her high school, she is determined to pursue further education for a career in the area of social work. Her decision to choose this field did not stem from her job. Rather, she became convinced through her volunteer work in a women's shelter, her involvement in many related issues with family and friends and her realization that people are drawn to her for help in these matters. She is sure this is the field in which she wants to be working, and in which she will be effective.

Having finished the two prerequisites to the program, she is at a decision point regarding how to proceed. The transition back to school has been chaotic and stressful. With the demands of family, work and study, she is concerned about her ability to cope. She is also concerned about

financing her efforts. In addition to this, the study process itself has been an ordeal. She found the calendar to be very confusing, and she ended up going to great lengths to find out what to do. She had so many questions. Once into the studies, she found she lacked adequate study skills, and turned to her sister for help in studying. She also finds the study process isolating with no one to talk to. What began as an enthusiastic re-entry to school, soon became discouraging. Leah is left facing a decision about how to proceed from here. Because of her difficulties with open learning, she is considering alternate ways to reach her goal. She will decide carefully, because she is committed to finishing what she starts.

LENA

For years, Lena has been operating a licensed day care in her home at the same time as she was caring for her young family. Through her job, she witnessed problem situations in the families of the children she cared for. She wanted to help, but felt helpless without proper educational requirements. She decided to enter the Social Service program at OLA, sure that this was the general field she wanted, but unsure of the different choices the field offered. She plunged right into the program, unaware of what it would be like to fit school into her life on a consistent basis. She knew she would enjoy learning; she had taken some work-related workshops over the years. Although the workshops were intimidating at first and her life was hectic, she came to enjoy learning very much as she felt valued and appreciated.

This experience with OLA shows her, at twenty-nine years old, taking full responsibility for herself, finding the help and support she needs as she works through the course work and fits school into her already busy life. She is reluctant to ask for help from her tutor, preferring to work it out first

by herself. Shortly into her studies, she became very stressed, finding that this effort took a great deal of energy, and that her family was disrupted. After some panicky times and a great deal of adjustment, everything finally fell into place. Her priority is to ensure that her family is well cared for. Her perseverance has enabled her to deal with vying roles, and she is challenged by the study. She acknowledges that she needed more help and support at the beginning of this transition to school, than later.

Lena decided to take one course at a time to minimize the disruption to her life. She plans to use the months until her daughter is in school to carefully adjust, at which time she will devote more attention to the program.

KERRY

Kerry had no plans to register in the Dental Assisting program at OLA. Her intentions were to take the prerequisites only as a means of gaining admittance into such a college program. At the time of our interview, she was waiting to hear from the college to know if she was accepted. Good timing was what prompted Kerry to return to school. After thirteen years of work in retail sales, she went on strike for fourteen months. She had always wanted to continue her studies, but was reluctant to give up her job to do so. This opportunity was one she does not want to miss. She had spent the first eight months of being on strike, in college and OLA preparing for the Dental Assisting program.

This transition back to school after thirteen years away was not easy for her at first. She had difficulty studying again and coping with the stress of the strike. She came close to quitting.

Although this move was scary, however, it was also exhilarating. She soon came to have fun and enjoy the mental switch from mundane work. She found the back-to-school experience valuable in allowing her to work out her discipline problems, readjust her life and teach her how to study again. At thirty-two, she is eager to continue, since she feels like she is on a roll and does not want to lose the momentum. Kerry's interest in dentistry stemmed from her own extensive history of dental care to correct a deformity. These experiences gave her a knowledge and an interest in the field. It was a career she had wanted for some time. As she waits for acceptance from the college, she worries about her lack of confidence and fear of failing. She is strong and determined, though, and plans to constantly work at building her self-confidence.

COLLEEN

Colleen is a forty-year-old mother of teenagers and a full time worker in the Social Services. Five years ago, she became involved in the community as a volunteer counsellor. At the time, the community organization agreed to sponsor her for a series of related training programs over two years. Her training and experience with them led to a job funded by the Ministry of Social Services. Every time other job opportunities came up through the Ministry which she felt she could do, she was reminded that she needed certification. She decided to enrol in the Social Service Worker program with OLA to get that certification.

Colleen was somewhat nervous as she re-entered school, and she was unclear about what to expect. Her previous schooling however, through the community organization, was very satisfying and she looked forward to learning again. She discovered that her support needs were greater at the beginning of this re-entry to school than later. When we talked, Colleen was more relaxed

and interested in finding out more about possible avenues to follow within this career. She is assertive in seeking answers to her questions and is planning her career decision very carefully.

DIANE

Diane is studying in the Dental Assisting program at OLA and is determined to work at it until she graduates with her certification. At twenty-four, she is married with young children and has been working full time in a dental office for six months. Two years ago she went back to school to complete her high school. It was a good and satisfying experience for her and she was proud to be no longer a high school drop-out.

Her entry into the field of dentistry began as an interest. Before she decided on a career to pursue, she offered her time in a dental office, in return for getting exposure to the field. The dentist offered her a job. Further, he offered to finance her studies at OLA as she worked, preferring to guide her learning according to his practice. She gladly accepted. In spite of the fact that Diane's life is much more complicated by adding study, she is a determined young woman, knowing what she wants and very committed to getting it. She gains a great deal of confidence from knowing that she is achieving something worthwhile. She challenges her problems with study and seeks the information she requires as she goes along.

JANE

Jane is twenty-eight years old, a single parent of two youngsters and happy with her job in a dental office. She was prompted to return to school following a divorce which left her with sole

financial responsibility of her young family. In attaining certification as a Certified Dental Assistant through OLA, she is seeking, more than anything else, financial security. This need makes her extremely committed to succeed. Jane is a proactive individual, taking full responsibility for herself, her children and her learning needs by doing whatever it takes to progress. She prepared herself well for reentry into this program, by asking a lot of questions and reading any pertinent material. She knew what to expect of going back to school from her experience of taking a college course the previous year. She knew what to expect of the field of dentistry from her ongoing work in it.

It was her former schooling experience which led to her decision to choose OLA for study. Having gone through a difficult and trying time manipulating her life to accommodate college, she appreciated the flexibility that OLA gives to adjust her studies to fit her already busy life. Regardless of the energy it takes to combine the three major roles of parenting, working and studying, Jane considers furthering her education later, using this certificate as a springboard for a university degree.

PAIGE

"I'm not as dumb as I thought I was." That is what Paige said after her husband got her started doing crossword puzzles. She concluded that if she could do those, she could finish her high school, and she did. The experience of completing high school a year ago, was a turning point in her life in many ways. She gained a sense of pride and worthiness through this endeavour, and her behaviour became more assertive. She was no longer shy to speak up on issues, and found that people actually paid attention. She graduated with high marks and was awarded a

scholarship to continue her studies. She is extremely proud of herself. Little time lapsed before she enrolled in the Business Skills Certificate program with OLA, at thirty-three years old. She chose open learning because it fit her role caring for a young family. It also allowed her to proceed at her own pace, and as she has the funding. Although she is proceeding slowly, because of finances, she is pleased to have her "foot in the door".

Her choice of the Business Skills program reflects her interest in computers and follows her plans to open a business with her husband at some time. She is confident that her skills will still be beneficial even if the business does not work out. I got the sense that Paige has been launched on an adventure. She is extremely enthusiastic and she is confident that she has much to gain from continuing in school, and has the ability to do it. The time it takes her to complete the program and the employment she gets as a result, is not of paramount importance to her. "The doors are all open to me. I can do whatever I want...(but) I won't be doing beds (any more) - I'll tell you that!"

B. Profiles of Indecisives

CHERYL

After taking one prerequisite in the Social Service Worker program at OLA, Cheryl has decided to withdraw from the program. The difficulty and trauma she is experiencing with this return to school has prompted her to rethink her decision. Cheryl recently moved from her home and job of eighteen years and decided to take a few months to reassess her career before beginning work again. She had been working as a secretary in a psychiatric hospital, interacting closely with social workers and patients. At forty years old, she wanted a career change and thought of returning to school to be qualified in social work. Given her former experience, the Social Service Worker program at OLA looked attractive and related.

It has been twenty years since Cheryl has been in school, taking her training as a medical secretary. Since she enjoyed that experience so much, she did not anticipate any problems now. She was mistaken. A number of things interacted to make this experience distressing for her. Just getting back into the study was an enormous task for her. She did not know how to study, what she should study, nor was she capable of staying focused for very long at a time. She greatly lacked the self-discipline to persevere. The demands of her family seemed to draw her away from her study regularly, whether out of necessity or out of her own volition.

She found herself frequently longing for someone to discuss her work with, to explain her work to her, to work with her. She does not want an isolating learning experience; she wants people to interact with. She believes that "after being away from school for so long, taking

correspondence is not the best idea". At the time we spoke, Cheryl wanted to continue to study, but was unsure of what and where. She was planning to use the services of a career counsellor before she continues further.

DANIELLE

After fifteen years of working in retail sales, Danielle finds that her "bones are tired", and she is eager for a change of career. She decided that this would call for further education. She had always wanted to go back to school anyway; it had been a great deal of pleasure for her. Because she works part time and devotes a lot of attention to her family, she chose to follow open learning with OLA.

Her selection of the Business Skills Certificate program was based solely on her interest. She had enjoyed the paperwork of school eighteen years ago and has an interest in doing income tax for family members. She got no career counselling and little program information from her contact with OLA upon registration. When asked about her knowledge of what this program entails, she said, "With open learning, they don't give you information like that. Probably if you wrote them a letter...they could send you something...(Basically, they just) send a little booklet and you look through it and decide what you would like to take". She approached a local college counsellor for help in understanding the registration material. Danielle is still unsure of a career. She realizes that she needs time to decide what she wants to do and time to adjust her life to include study. She is giving herself a year to explore and to adjust her life before she commits herself.

GRACE

Grace registered for the Social Service Worker program following the end of a career in real estate and a subsequent period of time relying on income assistance. At fifty-five and on her own, she has a strong desire to be working in a field where she can contribute. She is struggling with finances, however, and believes that education is the answer to financial independence and a satisfying career. She just "had a really difficult time nailing down the area where (she) wanted to be". She knew she needed to make a drastic career change. Her sympathy for youngsters in need, her desire to help people and her limited experience as a community volunteer led her to enthusiastically begin this career program. She acquired a student loan, since she was not eligible for social assistance as a student, and proudly began the first three prerequisites of this program.

Since her self-esteem was badly damaged with the loss of her job and the need for social assistance, she approached this endeavour as a means of elevating it. She confidently plunged in, believing there was no obstacle she could not overcome. Her optimism was soon replaced by high stress, which she cites as her greatest concern. Besides the late arrival of some course work, and subsequent reduced completion time, the cause of her stress seems to stem from being totally unprepared for this return to school. It had been fifteen years since she took her real estate course. She was unaware of what distance study was like, of the study time required, of the difficulty of studying in pleasant summer weather, of social assistance and student loan requirements, of what this career entailed, and of where she really fit. Ultimately, the pressure of course deadlines led to her dropping one course. She felt like a failure. At the time of our interview, she is on hold, unable to decide whether to work exceptionally hard to proceed in a

field she is uncertain about, or drop out entirely. The latter would mean a greater sense of failure and the obligation to seek social assistance again and repay the student loan.

TANYA

Upon signing up with OLA, Tanya's intentions were to take the first course, DENT 100, in order to explore a career as a dental assistant, which is the purpose of this course. At twenty -seven and facing a job market with few skills, she began to panic. With pressure from her friends, she felt she should go back to school and develop a career for herself. Her choice of this field was based upon an interest and observing several openings in the classified ads.

Although she had not been in school for ten years, she had little problem studying this introductory course. She lacked some discipline and found it difficult sometimes to concentrate, but for the most part, found it a challenge. Following the course, however, she decided against the field. She felt uncomfortable with certain aspects of dentistry, and was unable to fulfil the requirement of working part time in a dental office during study. Tanya is still very undecided about what she wants to do with her life. She is considering relocating to another province, and has to sort out how she will support herself. She lacks both direction in her life and confidence in herself.

PHYLLIS

Phyllis has spent the last several years bringing up a family, and five years ago, decided to add the role of full time work as a secretary. She entered the workforce with limited skills, and taught

herself the skills she needed for her jobs as she went along. She took various computer courses at night at a technical school, only to drop them because her life was too crowded. Her family and friends and her own needs are very important to her, and she does not want school and work to monopolize her life. She realizes that her learning experiences should include contact with teachers and other learners and that she learns best through being shown by someone, rather than by reading alone.

Phyllis became dissatisfied with her work, and began to explore where she would fit career-wise. Her primary motivation was to contribute to her world, rather than doing something meaningless. At thirty-eight years old, and having been out of school for twenty years, she took her time to make a decision. She began exploring a career by taking this first course in the Dental Assisting program, basing this choice on some work experience with a dentist in her youth. Now, having completed this exploratory course, she has put her studies on hold, realizing that this is really not the field she wants. She does not regret having taken this course however, for she sees it as a good learning. She adamantly wants to avoid pursuing a path which may prove to be a poor choice. Although she is concerned about making a career decision, she is in no hurry to choose. She plans to take a career exploration course with a local college to help her decide. "It's probably the best twenty bucks I can invest", she says.

DEE

After several years working in a variety of jobs, Dee was offered a job in a dental office. With a strong desire to succeed, and encouragement from the dentist, she pursued related courses, much as she had done with her other varied jobs. In taking the Dental Assistant program with

OLA, she planned to prove to her boss that a co-worker was exaggerating how busy she was. Weeks later, she lost her job and dropped out of the program.

Dee is a hard-working committed individual once she decides what to pursue, and she loves learning. This compensates for her tendency to procrastinate while studying at home. She enjoys studying, struggling to make sense of the course work herself, rather than "imposing" on her tutor. She chose to draw support from her family and appreciated the fact that open learning gave her a sense of control and relaxation. As we began our interview, Dee had little idea how she would proceed from here, other than finding another job. As we concluded our interview, however, she mentioned that she may consider the option of finishing the DENT program after all. After making educational decisions dictated by her varied jobs for so long, she likes the idea of looking at what is good for her.

SHEELA

Sheela went back to school last year to finish her high school after twenty-six years out of school. She had had this goal for a long time and finally decided to get it done. She approached the administration of a local high school and was streamlined into the classroom. The experience was unnerving at first. She had to deal with working alongside young students, learning to study again, and facing new challenges like making presentations. Ultimately, though, she enjoyed the experience very much, gaining a great deal of confidence and pride in her high achievements.

She put little thought into her decision to enrol subsequently in the Social Service Worker program at OLA. She based her choice on an enjoyment of working with people, her involvement in Cubs and Brownies over the years and a look at the OLA calendar. She was drawn to OLA because the small town where she lives does not have a college. Sheela is forty-seven, and is finding her study with OLA difficult. While doing her prerequisites, she realized too late that she was struggling through an advanced course, when what she needed was the basic one. She was also easily discouraged without face to face tutorial assistance, and had trouble combining school work with her work in the home.

At the time we spoke, Sheela had plans for moving out of province. She would not continue with OLA, except for completing her course assignments, up until the point of writing the exams. She adamantly wants to finish the courses she started first, believing that unless she does, she would be a quitter. She has no definite plans as to whether she will continue with school once she has moved.

FINDINGS

An early analysis of the results clearly showed a division of respondents into two distinct groups. One group was made up of eighteen purposeful individuals with a clear vision in mind of where they were going in terms of their careers. I have called this group the **Focused**. Seven of the twenty-five respondents were still searching for what they wanted to do and where they wanted to go. I have called this second group the **Indecisives**.

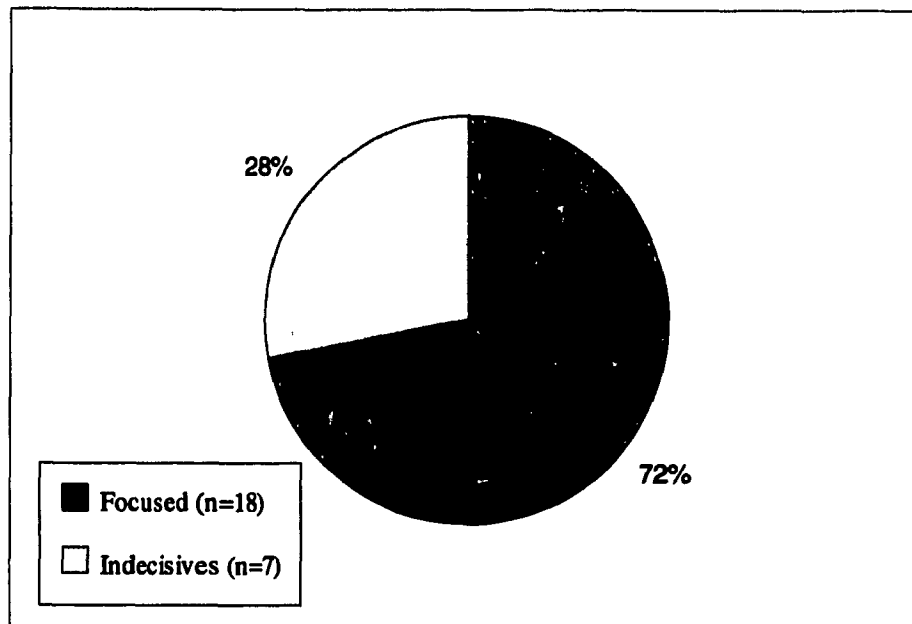


Figure 1 - Participants by Group

Along with these labels for the respondents, I add a caveat. The labels are not meant to suggest that all members of the group are identical. Rather, each individual is unique and distinct, therefore some of these "pegs" fit more tightly into these "holes" than others. Although all of those in a group have the common characteristic of being either decided or undecided about their end goals, within each grouping, there are differences. To explain, all of the **Focused** have a

clear career objective in mind, but may be unclear about a particular specialization in the field, the institution in which they wish to study, the pace at which they will study, the ready availability of time and money to carry out their goals and how to best adjust her life circumstances to accommodate school.

"Now as far as I'm concerned, the doors are all open to me. I can do whatever I want. I'm ready for the business world." (Paige)

I'm a lot happier, because I know I'm not stuck in a job I don't want to be in, cause I've started on my way to doing what I've wanted to do...(for) as long as I can remember. So I guess (I'm) deciding to finally take that step..." (Kerry)

Although the choice of career was very clear in the minds of all **Focused**, three of them expressed a need to further define a particular specialization in this chosen field, having been exposed through life experience to many different interesting alternatives.

"I know at this point I want to continue (the program)...I would like some type of job in this field, but as of yet, I don't know what all is expected. I am not familiar completely with the different avenues and things." (Lena)

The **Indecisives** are all undecided regarding the career they wish to pursue, but may have differing levels of commitment to resolving this, and some may be closer to resolution than others. They may or may not share some of the same other concerns as the **Focused** regarding the study process. Grace was completely undecided about her future goals.

"So what am I going to do?...I don't know yet...I just don't know. I'm still in limbo on that. Like, I'm just not sure."

Further analysis indicated that it is informative to regard the results of this study from these two perspectives: The **Focused** and the **Indecisives**.

This study will be reported in three sections, each presenting the findings of the analysis, including any differences between these two emergent groups, or among the three programs.

The three sections include:

- A. The Transition
- B. The Person, and
- C. The Study Process.

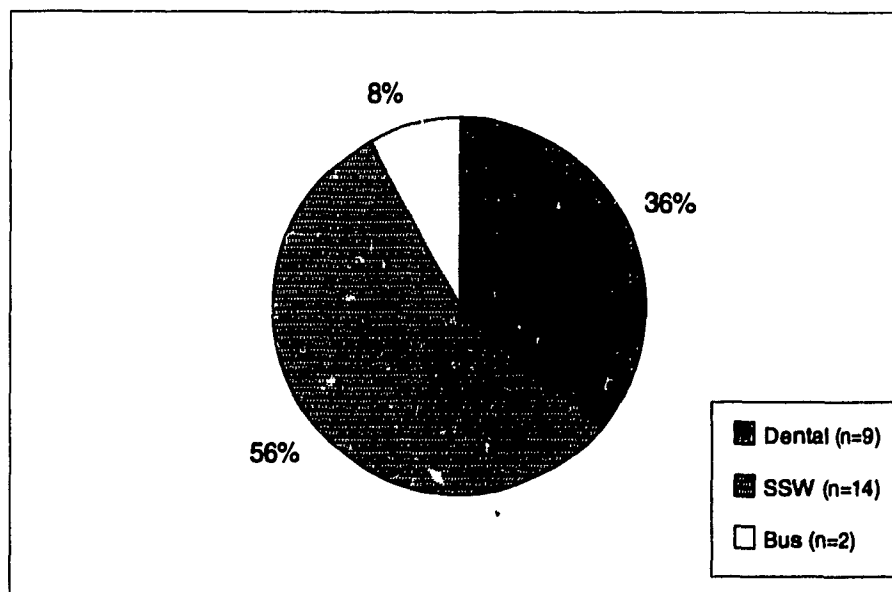


Figure 2 - Participants by Program

I. The Transition

A. Point of Transition

Respondents talked about what it was like for them to make this transition back to school.

*** Re-entry to school was more difficult at the beginning than later**

Several respondents were quite unprepared for fitting school into their lives, unaware of what to expect, and overwhelmed with the amount of time required to carry out the study while continuing to carry out their other roles.

"It is very intimidating. I thought in a way, I'll never be able to get through this (first) course ever...At first it was very hard. I mean, ...you are not quite sure what to do." (Corrie)

"I kind of went into it blind, and didn't really think about the fact that I would have to work all day and study on top of that...I thought I'm going to get this over with like in a year or whatever. I realize now it is going to take much more time."
(Diane)

After working through an initial difficult time, some told how they reached a point in the process of managing the transition, where they gained control of the situation.

"(It was a difficult process of) juggling my own life, my work life and my home life around it. I think I have got the knack (of it) for the next one I register for." (Dorie)

"I think I am coming on the other side...of change, you know...I can feel myself feeling a little more confident. If you had done this study at the beginning of the course, I would have felt different." (Linda)

"That whole week of work, I was terrified...My family went out for dinner two nights that week, (but) I didn't go. I stayed home...But now, (for) this next one -I'm not worried about it at all, because now I know the basic lay out and I'm not as concerned." (Gail)

B. Preparation

Study Skills

*** Upon re-entry to school with OLA, many expressed a need for study skills**

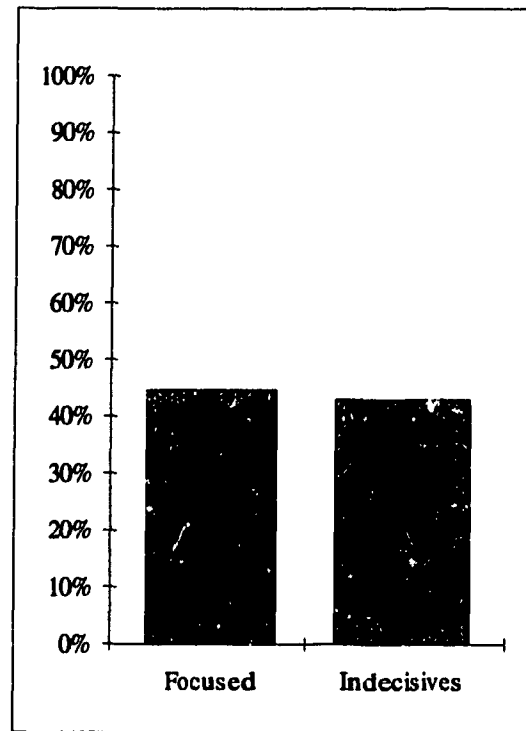


Figure 3 - Need for Study Skills

A discussion of the re-entry experience brought out information about the absence of certain study skills for many respondents in both groups. A significant portion of both groups, 43% and 44%, expressed the difficulties of getting into study, of knowing how to study, and of remembering what she studied. Although neither group had a greater need than the other, the difficulty across the board is important to note. It is also interesting that ALL those needing study skills, regardless of group, were registered in the SSW program. Leah and Gail talked about this need.

"Well you're not used to the study habits, and if you have never acquired any, you have to start acquiring some." (Leah)

"I think after working for eight years as a courier, you're so used to absorbing a lot of information. And then within an hour, discarding it. So I find it really hard because I'll read something, understand it, and an hour later I haven't got a clue what it was about...It is hard to get eight years of practice out and bring in a new one." (Gail)

Gail and Bonnie reported the effect of poor study skills on their confidence.

"The biggest part is, you know, you start looking at this thing, and you feel like a dummy. You know, you haven't been in school for so long and all of a sudden it is all coming down on you." (Gail)

"(Returning to school was) overwhelming. Cause I had a dictionary with me all the time. (I) thought I knew the meaning but I doubted myself. I was always looking up words to check their meaning. Just getting into reading (again)...It was overwhelming." (Bonnie)

Prior schooling

*** A greater proportion of Indecisives than Focused had been out of school over ten years.**

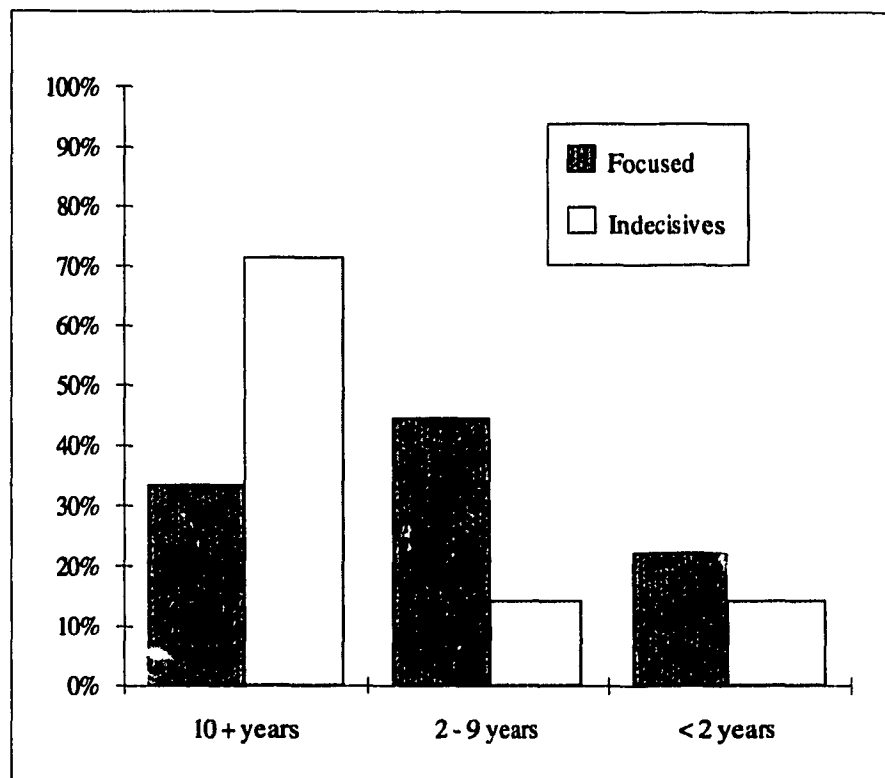


Figure 4 - Prior Schooling by Group

The two groups differed here considerably. The largest portion of **Indecisives**, 71%, had been out of school for ten years or more, compared with only 33% of **Focused**. The largest proportion of **Focused**, 44%, on the other hand, was in the 2-9 years ago range, compared with only 14%

of the **Indecisives** in this range. Finally, the smallest proportion of both groups, 14% of the **Indecisives**, and 22% of the **Focused**, had been to school less than 2 years ago.

Re-entry to school at this time was easier for those who had made a transition back to school recently. It seems that they had already dealt with the difficult transitional issues during that recent return to school.

"It was like I went right back to it...It wasn't like there was a year's lapse in there at all." (Paige)

"It was nice to be in a group and work with people and get back into the book work, and I think maybe too I was always somewhat nervous of doing that. You did it in sort of a safe place and it was done so well for me. I think that is what sort of encouraged me (to return this time)." (Heather)

II. The Person

A. Characteristics

Characteristics of individuals is an important contribution to understanding the whole picture of one's re-entry to school. Schlossberg (1981) suggests that both external and internal factors influence one's ability to manage a transition. Respondents' characteristics, then, can suggest some internal influences to this process of re-entry. Characteristics included here are age, self-confidence, and proactive qualities of the individuals.

Age

*** The average age of the Indecisive is several years higher than that of the Focused.**

Both the average age and the mean age of the **Indecisive** is 40 years old, and both the average and mean age of the **Focused** is 33 years old.

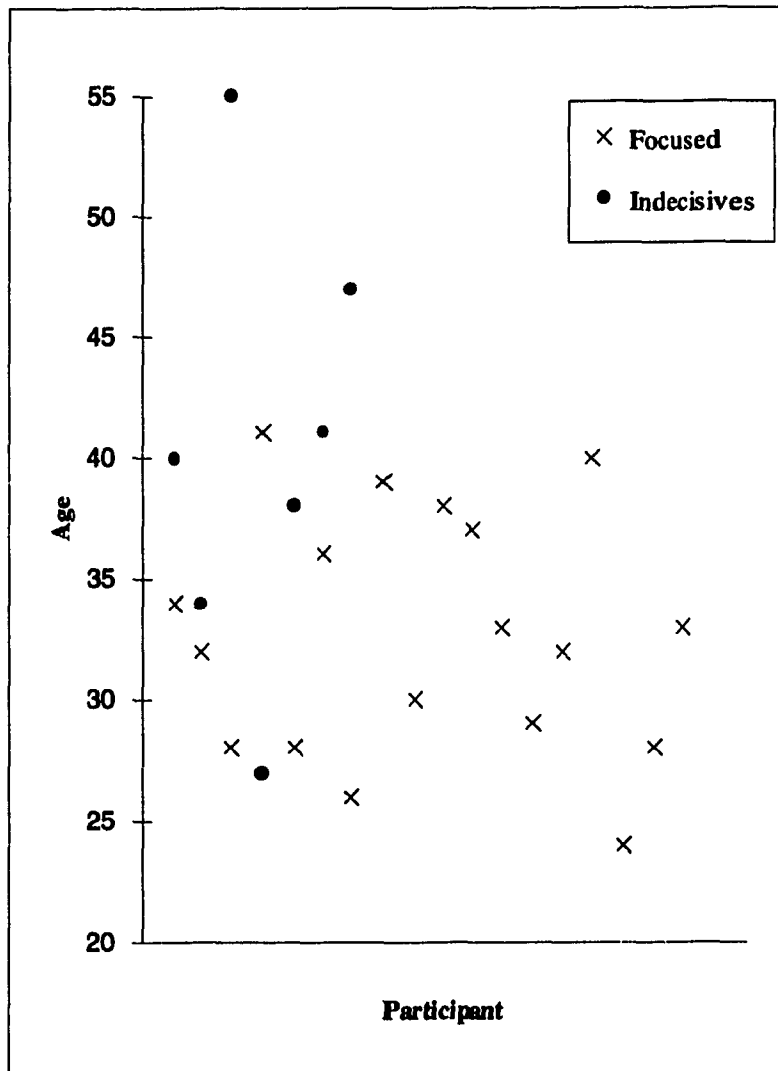


Figure 5 - Ages of Respondents

Self-confidence

* Many respondents dealt with low self-confidence upon re-entry to school.

Sixty five percent of all of those interviewed showed signs of having low self-confidence as they began this transition back to school. Although I expected to find lower levels of confidence in the **Indecisives**, in fact there was a slightly higher proportion of **Focused** with low confidence. Some individuals struggled more with this issue than others. Linda's experience demonstrates the overwhelming effect of a history of academic failures.

"Like, I'll get (my assignment back) from the mail; I'll come home and put it there...and my husband will open it and he will say, 'It is okay; it is okay'. I'm... in a panic...I don't want to look at it, (so) he takes the page that has the mark on it and puts it over...(I'll leave it) for a couple of days and then...read my mark...Like I just don't want to know because I don't want to get stopped...(I just) wish I wasn't so -excuse the expression- chicken-shit to open that envelope."

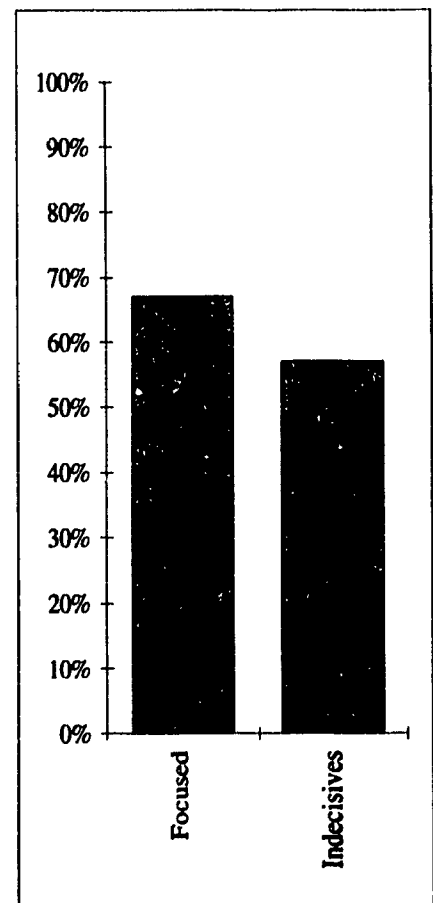


Figure 6 - Low Self-Confidence

Having lost her job just prior to her re-entry to school, Grace described her lack of confidence as she begins this program.

"(Losing my job was) demeaning; it was dreadful; it was like I lost self-esteem. I went from an absolute go-getter to, I don't think I can, like I don't know what I can do any more, like 'I don't think I can do a whole lot' type of person."

*** Several respondents expressed a reluctance in contacting the OLA tutors.**

Fifty seven percent of the **Indecisives** expressed discomfort with the tutor in some way, as did 28% of the **Focused**. This discomfort in contacting the tutor for help reflects the low self-confidence of many of these entry students.

"Knowing the tutor is there is fine, but of course, it's a strange person that you've never met, and if you are, not shy, but if you are not as social a person as some... you may tend to only call them if you really really really have to. (So) I was just a bit inhibited about calling her the first couple of times." (Dorie)

"Sometimes it is scary; sometimes if I have a problem I'll tend to put it on the counter and leave it, because I don't want to bother my tutor...with some little question that is...trivial....She is in Vancouver, and she is busy." (Linda)

*** Many recognized and dealt with their needs for building confidence.**

It was impossible in an interview to measure the level of confidence of each individual, but some admitted that confidence is a major issue for them to deal with and some realized that it was worse at the beginning of this re-entry than later. Knowing the effect of low confidence on their efforts, many were determined to avoid any threat to their self-esteem, so that confidence could improve.

"It is very difficult to go back to school; you have to have a little bit of self-confidence, which I didn't have, (but I) did okay in (this course) so I have gotten one step...I'm going to tackle them one step at a time, basically to protect myself as a person." (Mandy)

For Linda, protecting herself meant avoiding any potential further attacks to her confidence from 'teachers'. OLA, because of its' distance learning, allowed her this control.

"I thought starting it in a different school where nobody knows me, in a big agency...It is better that the teacher doesn't know me...If (she was) sitting right here, I would pretend. I would have my defences up...because...I have built these protective walls...just to protect myself...Over the phone, I can't really see them, and I can say what I have to say."

When asked what help she still needed in this respect, Linda wisely noted that confidence is not something that can be given to another, but to be developed within.

"(My husband) always tries to boost me up, but until I feel it, it won't (help)...(It's like if) somebody says your hair looks good or you look great, or you have lost weight...if I don't feel it, (it has little effect)...(So I need confidence) from myself...The only confidence I need is from myself and the support is from me."

*** The act of going back to school and achieving was, in itself, a source of confidence.**

Whether from a prior school experience or from this one with OLA, many respondents found that their achievement in school has been, in itself, a great confidence builder. Having returned to school to finish high school, Diane and Paige explained,

"(Going back to school) made me feel good, because I was doing something. I was finally... getting my diploma, instead of being a high school drop out." (Diane)

"When I lived at home, (there were) six brothers, and my dad wasn't into girls doing anything - male chauvinist- and my husband was the complete opposite. When he started me into the crossword puzzles, you know, I can say I'm not as dumb as I thought I was...(and when) I got A's and B pluses (from my courses), I felt a lot more worthy, so to speak. I don't look as dumb as I thought I was." (Paige)

Proactivity

*** ALL Focused were proactive and committed to carrying out their goals.**

Proactivity refers here to the individual's efforts to take responsibility for herself and her circumstances. It is planning ahead, taking initiative to find needed resources and information, and it is a determination to carrying out her plans. The **Focused** seemed to offset their problems with confidence by exhibiting strong proactive qualities. All **Focused** showed signs of taking responsibility for themselves, whereas only 43% of the **Indecisives** indicated any proactivity.

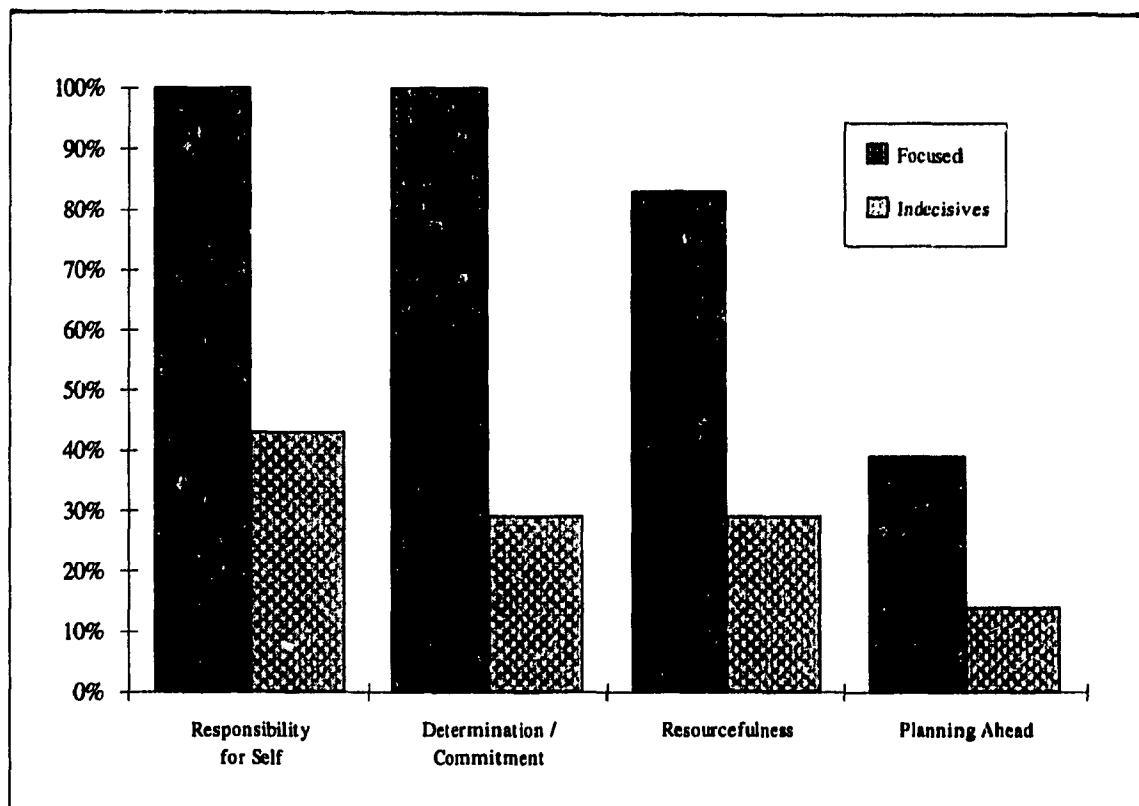


Figure 7 - Proactive Qualities

That is not to say that they did not possess these qualities, only that they gave no evidence of them in the interviews.

All **Focused** and 29% of the **Indecisives** expressed strong determination and commitment to achieving their goals, regardless of any barriers.

"(I had to) say, Yes, this is what I'm going to do. So I had to really say to myself before I started it, that that is what I was going to do. It didn't really matter what obstacles I had to come by after that. It was initially saying to myself I had to do it." (Mandy)

"I just try to keep plugging through it, even though sometimes I really get discouraged. Usually what I do is start thinking about all the good things that will happen once I get it done, and (that) just keeps me going." (Diane)

Thirty nine percent of the **Focused** and 14% of the **Indecisives** exhibited signs of planning ahead, and 83% of the **Focused** and 29% of the **Indecisives** talked of being resourceful in addressing their needs. It is interesting that all eleven **Focused** of the SSW program talked of being resourceful.

"I was aware of different...areas in general, but..my interest has now made me sort of ask more questions and find out exactly what is involved in this...Over the last year, I've been more interested in asking more questions." (Heather)

B. Life Circumstances

Finances and Time

*** Finances and time were not mentioned as barriers to continuation.**

In this study, 29% of the **Indecisives** and 67% of the **Focused** expressed financial needs as they studied. Others mentioned the difficulty in finding time to study. Although these respondents mentioned time and finances as constraints, however, **no one suggested these issues as reasons for discontinuing their studies.**

Fitting Study into her Life

* Several respondents expressed difficulty in fitting school into their lives.

This issue reveals the overlapping nature of study with the rest of a woman's life. Study in school is not a separate event in her life, but an integral part of all she is involved in. The results showed that 57 % of the **Indecisives** expressed difficulty at fitting school into their lives, yet only 39% of the **Focused** expressed such a problem.

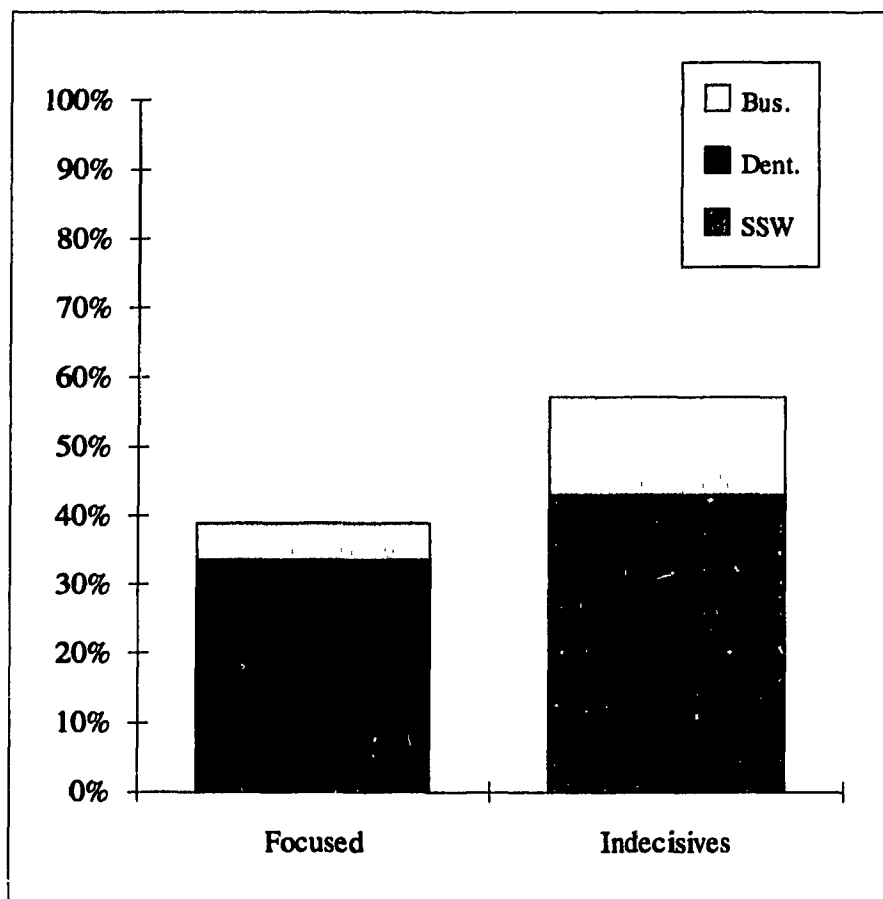


Figure 8 - Difficulty Fitting School Into Lives

"(Life) is a little more hectic...Now you have to fit actual study time or work time into your schedule when you could do other things. You have to work around your housework and children and stuff like that. When you have a spare moment, you dig out the books." (Danielle)

"Well, I just found it hard to combine school, house, and everything else. That was a toll. That took a big toll on me." (Sheela)

*** None of the students in the Dental Assisting Program expressed difficulty fitting school into their lives.**

It is interesting that a whopping majority (91%) of the total who expressed a concern with fitting school into their lives were registered in the SSW and the BUS program, yet only one in the DENT program experienced trouble in this way.

Sandra, who is following the DENT program, explains:

"With this program...you have to be working (in it at least) two days a week...You know, this idea of studying something related to what you're in...I recommend that..." (Sandra)

Roles

*** Half of all respondents had TWO other major roles besides that of student.**

These women returning to school clearly are not students only, as many of their counterparts in college may be. Rather, most also work outside their homes and/or are full time caregivers to a young family. In one case, extensive volunteer work was also mentioned as a major role and thus commitment of her time.

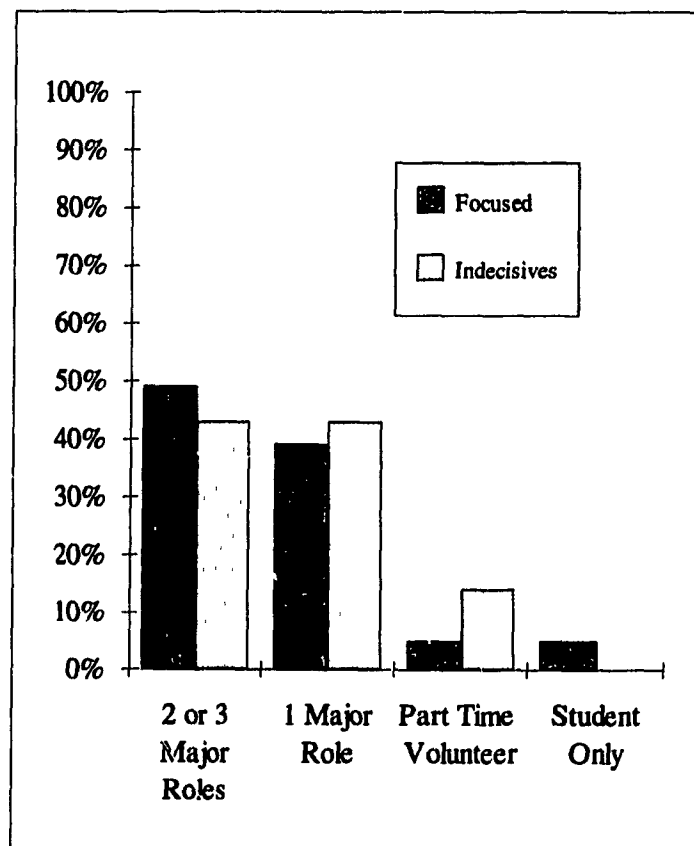


Figure 9 - Roles

Only one of the **Focused** had the single role of student. Also, one from each group mentioned that besides the role of student, they did some part-time volunteer work. The majority, however, occupied between one and three other major roles in their lives besides that of student.

Of the **Indecisives**, there was an even split (43% each) between those holding two other major roles, and those with one other major role in their lives besides student. The **Focused**' lives seemed slightly more full, with 50% having two (even three) other roles besides student, and 39% having one other major role.

The fact that 88% of all respondents have one, two or three other active roles in their lives shows that going back to school as an adult does not replace a role but adds to it. For the most part, the women's roles in the family and the workplace took priority over that of student. School, then, had to fit into their lives rather than having their lives conform to the rigours of school.

"Time was a big thing to make sure I had enough of it - to make sure that my family life was going on (all right), plus (that) I had sufficient time to make an honest effort to learn...(It) was hard, (however)...finding the time and organizing all this and having a family and a (job) and everything going all at once." (Lena)

"(My biggest concern) is (if) I'm going to be able to manage my family and take courses all at the same time and work (too), and know they are all going to sort of come together in the end." (Leah)

After years putting family first, some women expressed the desire to do something for themselves this time.

"You're learning something and you're doing something for yourself...Usually, you're a mother and...other people are more important, (but) now (I'm) taking time out and doing something for me." (Mandy)

C. Career Planning

Motivation

*** Indecisives were motivated to return to school in order to explore a new career.**

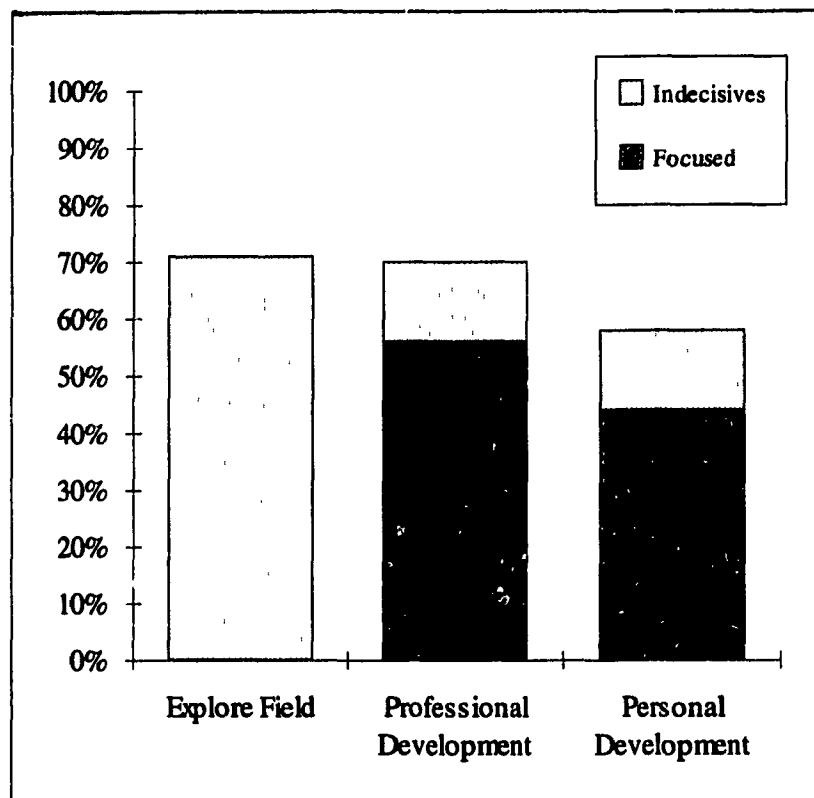


Figure 10 - Motivation

Respondents spoke about the impetus for making this decision to return to school, with the two groups differing greatly in their objectives. All but two of the **Indecisives** were motivated to return to school in order to explore a new field or career. None of the **Focused** had this in mind.

"I felt I kind of got burned out when the (real estate) market dropped in 1982. Subsequently, I have been trying to find my niche again. It seems to me I have just been spinning wheels...I (am having) a really difficult time nailing down the area where I wanted to be." (Grace)

"Basically...I never figured out what I want to do with myself...(and) I'm twenty-seven! All my friends thought I'd go back to school and I haven't, so I thought o-o-o-o, I'd better decide on something! So I thought - That's interesting; I'll have a look at that." (Tanya)

*** Focused were motivated to return to school for the purposes of job advancement or personal development.**

Only one of the **Indecisives** was prompted to return to school for personal development reasons, and one for job advancement reasons. The **Focused** group was split between the desire for personal development and for reasons of professional development or financial security. Both Heather and Jane were interested in professional development, with Jane's primary need being financial security.

"There were some other job opportunities that came up that I felt I was probably able to do, but we got back to needing this certificate." (Heather)

"I think (my plans) are pretty clear. To me, this is the same work I'm doing every day. Once I'm certified, I will be earning a lot more money like some people are. It sounds so material, but it's just the security." (Jane)

Although there is sometimes a fine line between professional development and personal development, the latter reflects a woman's internal desire to make a positive change in her life, or a positive influence on her world, as these statements indicate.

"I eventually went back because I have got fifteen years in retail and my bones are tired. I need a different field. I want to do something different, and I've always been interested in (this)." (Danielle)

"So, I just figured well, either I have to do it all or I'm going to be stuck in this sort of situation for the rest of my life, and I'm going to be 40 and I'm going to be 45 whether I want to be or not...Work is that much easier knowing that I'm not going to be doing this until I retire." (Leah)

"Some of the things I saw (in my job were) on the unpleasant side, you know...Some of the tough things that were happening to the kids -the neglect and things like that...I felt, (with) the work I was doing, almost helpless, and I thought, there is something more I can do." (Lena)

Knowledge of the Field

* Focused had a very clear knowledge of the field upon re-entry.

Given the finding that a large percentage of **Indecisives** registered in order to explore the field, it is not surprising that only 29% of this group had a somewhat clear knowledge of the field of choice. By comparison, 83% of the **Focused** felt they had a clear knowledge of the field upon re-entry to school.

Looking at this from the perspective of programs, 78% of all those in the DENT program, and 71% of all those in the SSW program had a clear knowledge of the field. Neither of the two participants in the BUS program indicated that they had a thorough knowledge of the field.

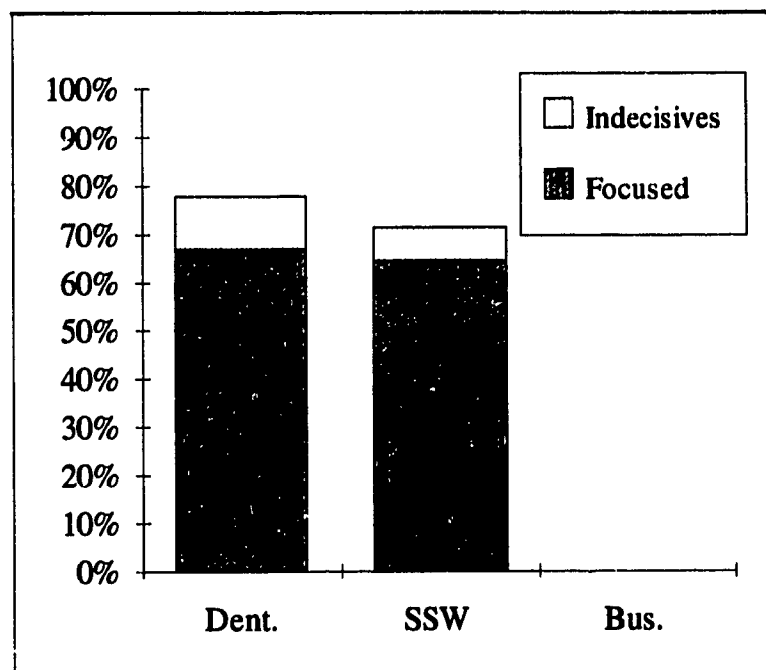


Figure 11 - Clear Knowledge of Field

"Working in the office...I had people that would come in and if the financial worker wasn't available, I would deal with them...I certainly learned a lot from that." (Erin)

"I did a little background on it. I sat in with a couple of workers...while they were doing the interviewing and stuff like that...I deal...first hand with the clients, so I know what kind of attitudes and responses...that you get from the clients." (Kate)

Mandy is studying in the DENT program and clearly knows the field after sixteen years of work in a dental office.

"I enjoy what I'm doing. I know basically what I'm doing and what I'm getting myself into."

Self-understanding

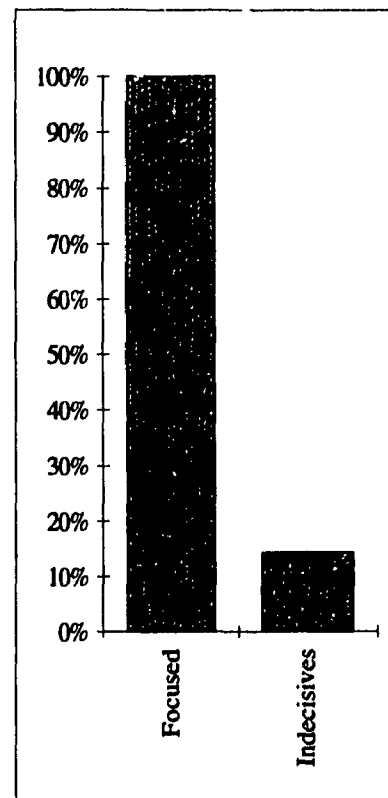
*** ALL Focused felt they were suited for the field they chose.**

Interview data yielded information which suggests whether respondents could see themselves in the field of choice, and what they thought they had to offer. Only one of the **Indecisives** felt they were right for the field, yet **ALL** of the **Focused** expressed certitude that this was a good fit for them.

"I don't know, I just thought, I could see myself in their footsteps." (Kate)

"So, I see myself being there. Actually, I see myself working, doing that type of work, you know, something there."
(Lena)

"I could picture myself doing that."
(Paige)



**Figure 12 -
Clear Knowledge of Self**

III. The Study Process

This is a look at what it is like for the respondents as they actually work through the program. These factors include the emotional and functional support available to them as they study, the relationship of the study to their work, the self-direction and self-control of open learning, their needs for interaction with others during study, any course work or exam difficulties, the sources of tutorial support and their intentions to continue.

Faced with several of these issues at once as she studied, Grace reminds us of the need to look at the whole situation of study at a distance, not just the parts separately.

"I think if I were to do it again, there has to be something out there that can really give (me) the whole concept or scope of what is going to happen."

A. Emotional and Functional Support

***Emotional and functional support needs were well satisfied for almost all respondents.**

I expected to find many instances of support needs from these women who were returning to school, given that support is so important during the initial stages of transition. I was surprised to discover, then, that only two individuals out of the total twenty-five interviewed expressed needs for support in these ways, and both of these individuals were **Indecisives** in the SSW program. This does not undermine the need for emotional and functional support for those in distance

education. The interview data indicated that this was indeed very important to the students, but for most, it was well satisfied in their work, home and social lives.

"I definitely had thoughts of 'Oh, I think I'll just give this up. This is just too hard.' And (my friends) said 'Forget it; you're doing good'...(Then) my girlfriend came over and didn't understand what I was talking about, but just sat there and nodded for half an hour and that did it!" (Kerry)

"I do have support from my husband, which helps...He'll say 'I'll take the kids. You can study'...and I have more support through my friends, and it feels really good...There are four (friends) on the street...and we said...'gee, we should (go back to school) and so we did.'" (Linda)

B. Relationship of Study to Work

*** A greater proportion of Focused than Indecisives performed work which was directly related to their study.**

The findings indicate that almost all of those with a clear knowledge of the field, gained this knowledge through their paid or volunteer work experience. Since few of the **Indecisives** had a clear knowledge of the field, and none had clear career goals, it is not surprising that only one of them had work which was directly related to her program. On the other hand, 67% of the **Focused** work is directly related. Looking at it another way, 57% of the **Indecisives** and only

11% of the **Focused** had no commonality between their jobs and their program. A small proportion of both groups had an indirect relationship between job and program.

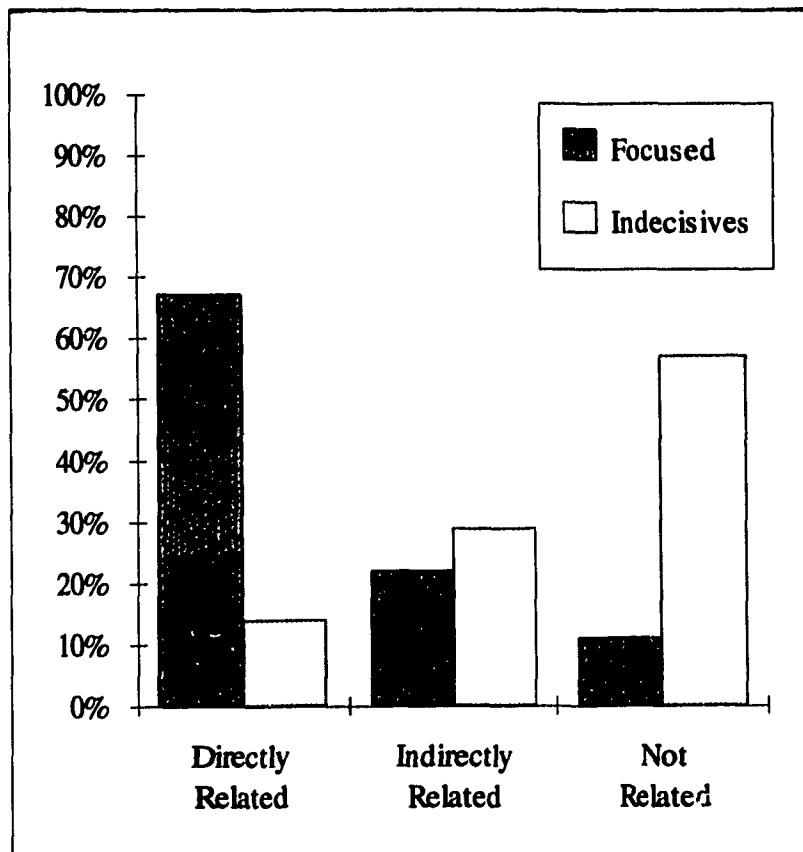


Figure 13 - Relationship of Study to Work

"I just find (it's best if) you're working in it and studying it. I don't know if I could actually take correspondence without actually working in what I'm taking, because I'd find it a lot harder to understand." (Megan)

"The way my dentist explains it, he would rather have somebody who learned it this way with hands-on experience than to have somebody come out of the nine-month training at a college... (who has) learned all the information, (but doesn't) have a clue really what to do." (Diane)

C. Self-direction and Control

* Open learning had both advantages and disadvantages for the respondents.

As far as distance study is concerned, I got indications of both its' problems and its' advantages. Some respondents talked about annoyance with this self-managed study process, including dealing with procrastination and detachment.

"It is like, oh, I have got to do this, and I... get so, you know, 'You have got to do it, you have got to do it, you have got to do it', that (it) gets distasteful. It is like I don't want to do it (at all)." (Gail)

"It is kind of hard because I don't really know if what I'm writing down is right until I get (the) papers back from my tutor...So I've just kind of done it on my own, and I found that, you know, there is nobody to talk to about it..." (Leah)

"Even though you feel so gung ho at the beginning, (it becomes) really hard to get through the studies...to keep going." (Leah)

For some, distance learning was an advantage, as it allowed them to control the pacing of their learning and to fit it into their existing life structures.

"I'm not thinking in terms of school years from September to July, like the old system. I'm thinking in terms of 'Okay, I start one; I finish one.' I'm not looking at dates...I'm looking at my own progress. I'm looking at my own pace...(In the same way), I don't eat when it is twelve o'clock; I eat when I'm hungry!" (Linda)

"I have been very impressed with the Open Learning Agency, and...given my circumstances with a new baby,...(it is good for me)...Attending classes during the day and...working part time, that would just be too much." (Emma)

D. Interaction during Study

*** Many respondents expressed needs for interaction during the study process.**

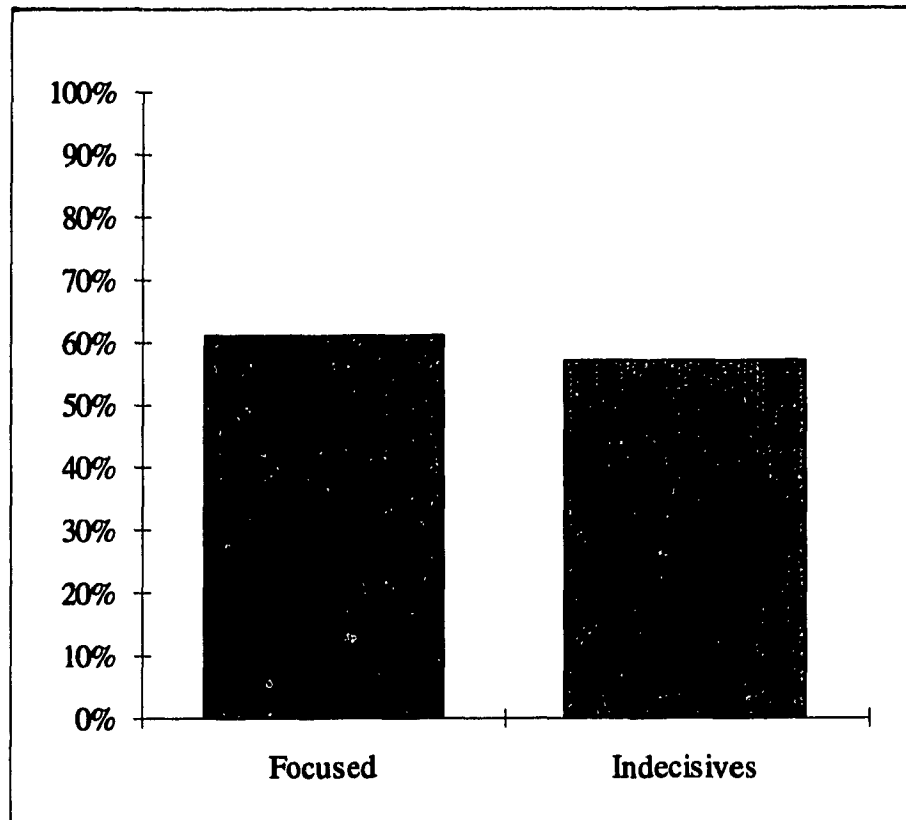


Figure 14 - Need for Interaction

A large proportion of all respondents (57% of the **Indecisives** and 61% of the **Focused**) expressed a need for interaction during the study process, although there was little difference between groups, and no significant difference among the three programs.

"(If I had known the difficulty of studying alone), I would have chosen to go through college or university, because I needed to bounce things off people and I had no one to do that with." (Cheryl)

"Certainly I miss just sitting there and being able to go over things with somebody...sort of easy relaxing stuff that you probably sit around at coffee breaks and discuss." (Heather)

E. Coursework Difficulties and Exams

*** Some found registration materials confusing, but most were satisfied with the course work materials**

Although several respondents found that the course work materials stood alone, needing no further explanation, there were some complaints about the difficulty understanding and sorting through the registration materials.

"(The calendar) was like French - not even French. It was in another language. I didn't understand what to do. I think one of the hardest things was, you know, like phoning the people and saying, 'Well, what does this mean, and what does this mean, and where do I start?' (Leah)

Although no one in the DENT or BUS programs expressed difficulty with the course work, three **Indecisives** and four **Focused** in the SSW program expressed such a concern.

"(I) sit there and ...read things over and over, and it is like, am I a moron...has my brain gone soft? I think a big part of it is the feeling of not being smart enough. You know, why am I doing this if I don't get it. I must be dumb." (Gail)

*** The pre-requisites were annoying or difficult for some of the Focused in the SSW program.**

Four of the **Focused** found the prerequisites to be difficult and annoying. These people had registered for a program of interest, Social Service Work, and were required to begin their studies by completing boring or difficult prerequisites which, in their minds, had nothing to do with their program of interest. These students were anxious to get to the "meat" of their program.

"There (are) probably a lot of kids that are...just coming out of high school...that are going, 'Oh, that's all right. I know that.' But there (are) some of us who have been out (of school) for ten years that don't remember what a clause is. (To me), a clause is something in a contract!" (Gail)

There was also some frustration with studying when no one was on hand to explain the course work at that moment. This issue is portrayed to some extent in the dissatisfaction with tutor hours and the need for interactive learning, but it also reflects a learning style. There seems to be a need for help when "on a roll". Erin talked about confronting a problem at a time when the tutor was not available.

"(I felt like) I'm going to lose that feeling...that flow. I'll write the question down, but I want to go on. I felt really stymied, and ...(it) would sort of needle at the back (of my mind), 'I don't understand. I don't understand'."

"It can be...frustrating, because you can only call your tutor two days during the week at certain times." (Emma)

*** Several respondents experienced exam anxiety.**

Although the subject of exams was not raised by most of the respondents, there was sufficient dissatisfaction with them to warrant mention. Although most of the problems with exams came from the **Focused**, participants from both groups expressed concerns about extreme anxiety before an exam. A great deal of frustration was also expressed due to not knowing what content was most important to stress for exams. Tutors were not found to be helpful in easing this frustration.

"I went in there and I couldn't remember a lot of the things that they had written on there. But I mean I studied and I'm not kidding for probably two months...(The exam is) worth so much...When I went in to do the test, my mind, my head was pounding so badly. It was like my mind couldn't remember anything." (Corrie)

*** Several expressed concern about knowing what content to emphasize for exams.**

"I find this upsetting because I do strive to get the good marks, and like I say, I go in to write an exam. I studied what I feel is important because I have no guidelines...(I have done) well (in my assignments) and (my) marks are A minus, A, A Plus...(I) have studied and studied and (I) go and write this exam and... come out with a 60. (I) worked so hard (but) everything (I) studied isn't on there, and (my) mark is brought down to a B minus because of this." (Emma)

"I really, really studied hard on that, and I knew it inside and out, but there is so much to cover on the whole thing; I mean, I must have had like thousands of pages to study...So it made me nervous because I thought, 'If you don't know one of them, you are in big trouble', and I guess that is what I did. I was in big trouble." (Corrie)

"I was really quite nervous about (the psychology exam), because it covered so much, so many different areas and topics...I ended up really memorizing a lot of material that certainly didn't come up on the exam at all...Maybe if there had been some kind of outline." (Claire)

Some felt that there was too much weight placed on one exam at the end of the course, adding to the stress of not knowing what to focus on, and having no one to review with.

"(It would be a good idea to) halve your material and take a test, instead of the whole thing at the very end...It's worth 50%! It is worth so much...If you don't pass it..you fail your course for one little test." (Corrie)

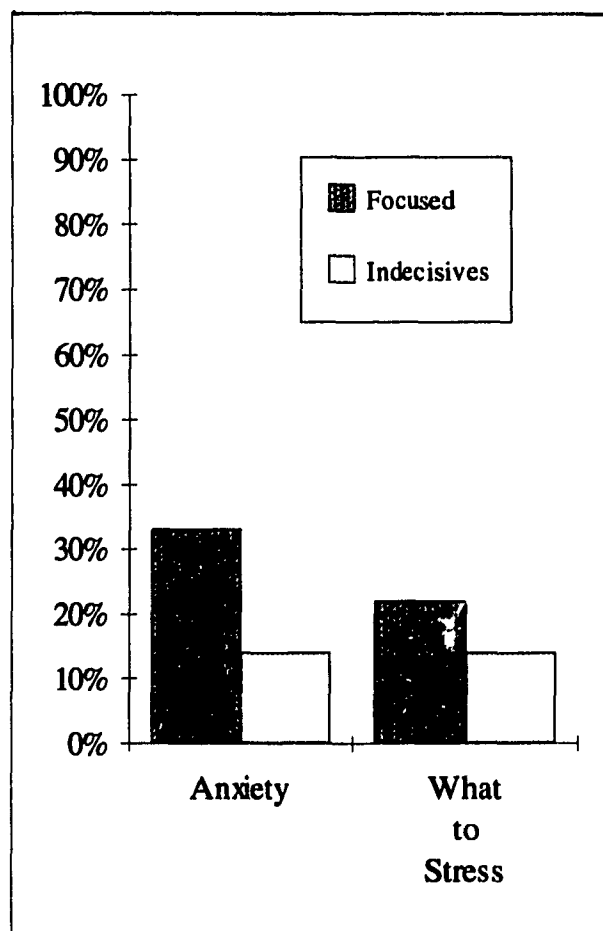


Figure 15 - Exams

F. Tutorial Assistance

This section looks at the designated tutor from OLA, as well as other individuals who perform a tutorial function for students studying in these programs. It looks at satisfaction with the tutor as a result of a student's interaction with him or her, at tutorial assistance found on the job or elsewhere, and reveals those who do not seek tutorial assistance at all, preferring to work things out entirely alone. A few respondents noted that they use two sources of tutorial help equally, such as contacting both the tutor and professionals at work.

*** Several respondents were dissatisfied with tutor hours or attitudes.**

Earlier, I mentioned the discomfort many felt in contacting or "bothering" the tutor, reflecting a lack of confidence. Here, we look at dissatisfaction with the OLA tutor as a result of interaction with him or her. Twenty-nine percent of the **Indecisives** and 50% of the **Focused** became dissatisfied with their efforts to get help from the tutors. This dissatisfaction was usually related to the approach or attitude of the tutor.

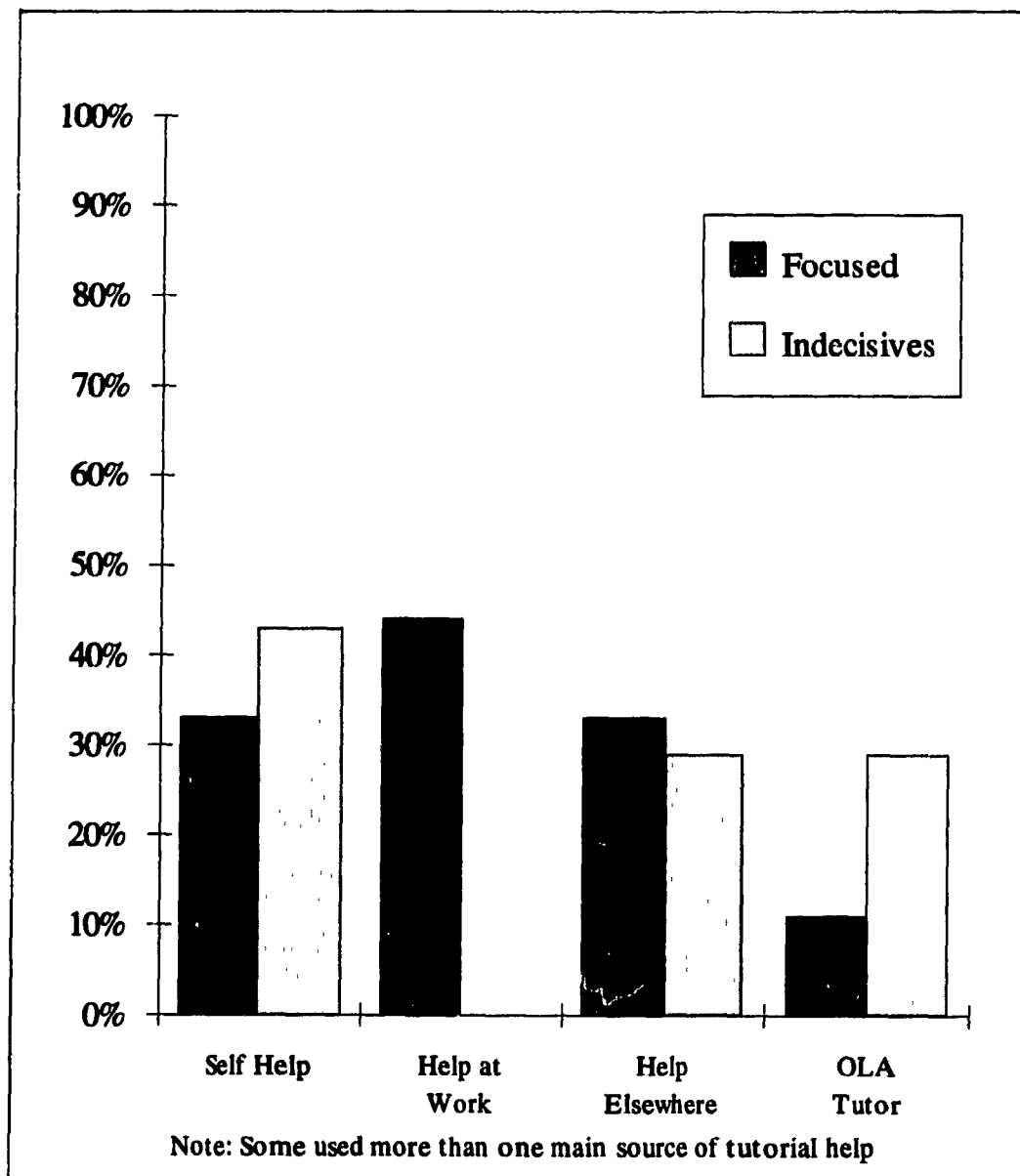
"I just felt like, doesn't he realize that I haven't been to school in the last fifteen years?... I'm not even quite sure what to do... you know...Questions that I asked maybe to him were stupid, but to me...If you haven't ever done it, how are you supposed to know it? He made me feel really dumb." (Corrie)

"I don't think he understands what it is like to be at home and raising children and the whole bit." (Corrie)

Dissatisfaction was due, more often, to the hours of the tutor.

"If I'm sitting here working at two or three in the afternoon, I should be able to get a hold of somebody...Maybe (it's a good idea to) give everybody a list of maybe three tutors. If you can't get a hold of #1, maybe #2 or #3 are available... Because I find that I waste days trying to get hold of somebody, and by the time I get hold of them, I'm so frustrated." (Gail)

*** The Focused sought help fairly equally at work, elsewhere or working it out on their own;**
many Indecisives worked it out on their own.



**Figure 16 - Main Sources of Tutorial Help
(By Group)**

When faced with coursework problems, the **Focused** group either sought help through their work, found help elsewhere, or worked it out on their own. Only two of them used the tutor most of the time.

"If I can't talk to my tutor...the next day when I go to work...I ask the other CDA's there or the dentist...I'll get them to help me out." (Diane)

"I'm very fortunate in that...I'm able to study at work...and I also have a social worker across the hall (who helps me)." (Heather)

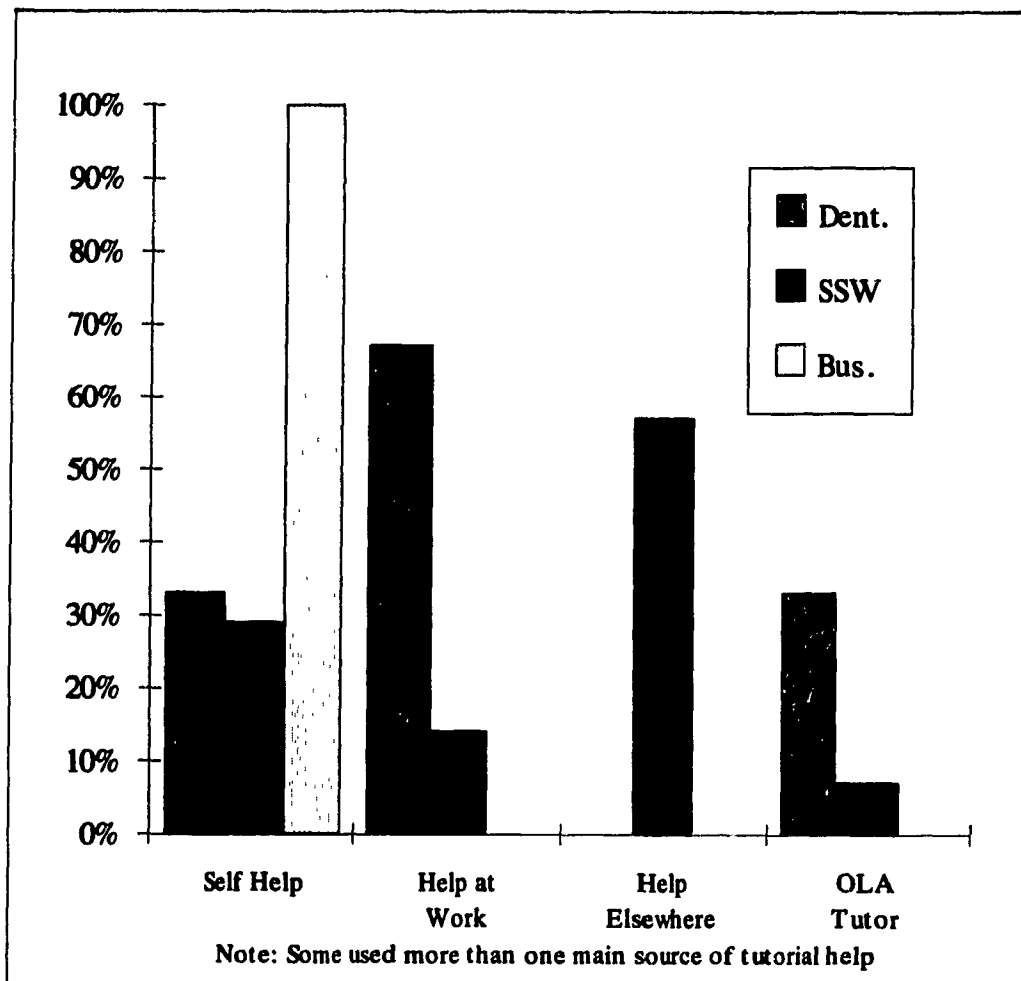
None of the **Indecisives** sought help at work, most of them choosing to work things out on their own, with several looking elsewhere from friends, former teachers and family or from the tutor.

***A majority of those in the DENT program sought help at work; all in the BUS program preferred to work on their own; the majority in the SSW program sought help elsewhere.**

"(I get help from) somebody else, like my aunt, who has taken this course...I read to her what it says and she puts it in real terms." (Gail)

Linda's distrust of teachers and fear of being put down led her to seek help elsewhere, particularly in someone she trusts.

"I have a friend that lives here (who helps me)...She is a teacher, but she is a friend first."



**Figure 17 - Main Sources of Tutorial Help
(By Program)**

G. Intentions to Continue

*** All but one of the Indecisives had stopped studying, at least for now: All but one of the Focused were continuing to study.**

One of the greatest differences between these two groups pertains to respondents' intentions to continue or to pause in their studies. All but one of the **Focused** group had clear intentions to continue on with their studies as they had been without delay.

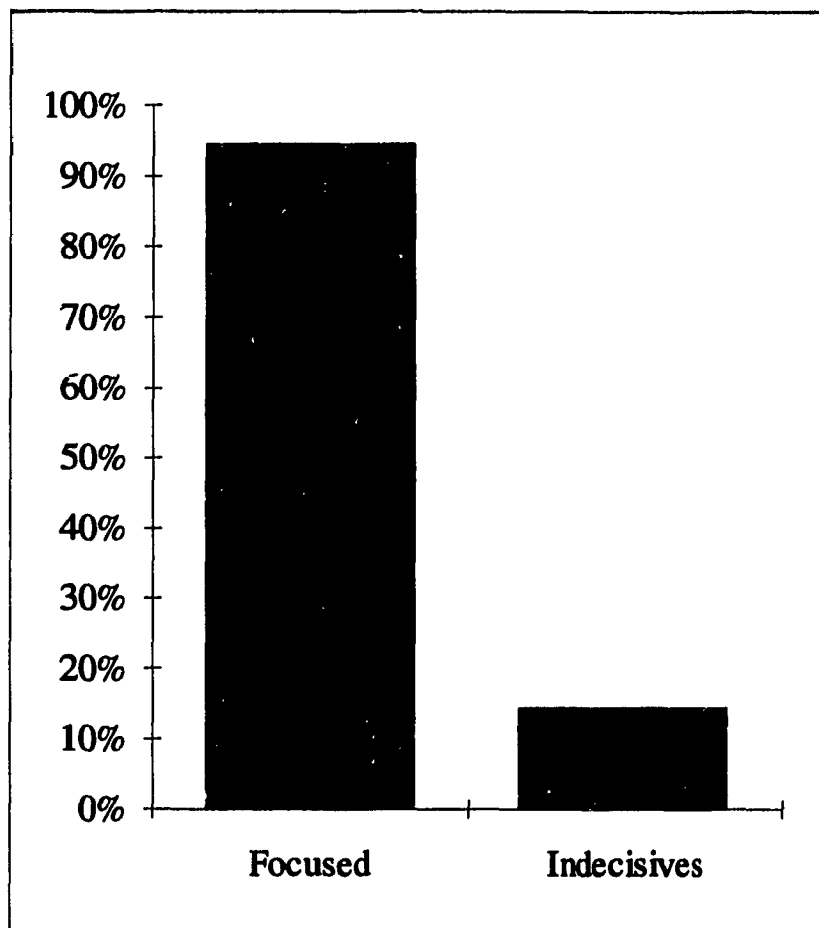


Figure 18 - Intentions to Continue

"Actually, I'll be finishing with OLA. I'll be going right through." (Emma)

"At this time, I'm planning on taking the full course through." (Heather)

All but one of the ~~Indecisives~~ had completely stopped or had paused in their studies pending more consideration of this whole issue of returning to school.

"I've got the books and I have been trying to study in the evening, but there has been too much going on...Right now, the program is on hold 'cause we've had the baby here and everything." (Sheela)

" Actually, I just took the intro...I'm not (studying) right now 'cause I'm not too certain if I'm going to be in B.C. or Calgary." (Tanya)

IV. Summary of Findings

In answer to my research question, the following statements summarize the findings of the research.

Situations of the respondents

- A. Going back to school was part of a process of career change. Women were at different points in that process, either exploring the career, or distance education, as a means of career development, or they were initiating their plans to meet their career goals through education.**

- B. Women with clear career goals were further along in their career change decisions than those with no clear goals.**

- C. There is a link between goals and persistence. Those with clear career goals were determined to continue to study, while those with no clear goals intended to stop studying.**

- D. The early stages of transition back to school, for those facing a great deal of newness and change, were fraught with instability, fragility, low confidence, stress and chaos. The effects of transition for those facing little change, was minimal.**

- E. Women needed most help during the initial stages of transition. After they 'got over the hump', things settled down somewhat.**

- F. Isolated study was not comfortable nor desirable for most women in the study.**
- G. Women carried several roles at once, adding that of student, rather than replacing a role. The role of caregiver to a family was placed in top priority over all other roles, and would not be compromised in the least.**
- H. The more similar, or compatible, the roles, the less difficulty women had to adjust to study. Those who worked in the same field as their topic of study were more likely to have clearer goals, strong intentions to meet these goals, less difficulty adjusting to school, and more sources of support, and tutorial assistance.**
- I. The familiar environment of students in this study was the preferred source of much needed information and support, particularly tutorial help, emotional support, functional support, interaction and guidance.**

Information needs

- A. **About the field and herself in the field.** Those without clear goals were clearly exploring the field of choice, seeking information about the field through the introductory courses at OLA, and discovering their own comfort and interest in working in this field.
- B. **About going back to school.** Many women were unprepared for returning to school. They were unaware of how long it would take, how to manage their time, how to study, who to call for information and what various requirements were.
- C. **About the effects of going back to school on her life.** Many women were unaware of how going back to school would disrupt their lives, and how much adjustment would be necessary.
- D. **About distance learning.** Several respondents were unprepared for the difficulty of study on their own, especially the isolation.
- E. **About the courses themselves.** There was much disillusionment over the content of the prerequisites, many not realizing they would have to wait some time to get to the "meat" of their program. Others were unaware of what the courses entailed, and some felt they took the wrong one. Regarding exams, there was a lack of understanding of the exam formats and little knowledge of what content to stress for exams.

Support needs

- A. The early stages of transition.** The initial stages of going back to school were intimidating and stressful for many students. In addition, low self-confidence was evident in many respondents at this point. Many were dealing with a great deal of uncertainty, change and adjustment, and clearly needed support from several sources at this time.
- B. The environment.** Support needs were satisfied for the most part in the familiar environments and from the familiar people within that environment, such as family, friends, former teachers and former colleagues. Most of the SSW and BUS students lacked support from the workplace.
- C. The tutor.** Emotional support from the tutor was especially needed in the early part of the transition back to school, by those whose work was not in the same field as the study program, by those with trouble learning how to study again, and by those with low self confidence. Tutorial support was needed during the times the students studied. It was important to some students that the tutor understood their situations at home, and what it was like to get back into study again.

- D. **Interaction.** This was considered a very important factor in study, but was missing for many students studying on their own, especially so for those who were not working in a similar field. Because of low confidence, many struggled without it, and others were searching within their familiar environments for sources of interaction.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FINDINGS

The conclusions of this study begin with a model of a career change process, since this was the impetus for making this transition in the women's lives. This model was developed when it became clear through analysis of the findings, that participants were at either of two different points in a process of making a career change. Some women, most of the Indecisives, were unsure of the career change they wanted, and chose OLA as a means of exploring or confirming a particular career. Others, primarily the Focused, were further along, having a very clear career goal in mind. They were following an educational route, particularly OLA, to achieve that goal. Following presentation of the model, the conclusions will address the transition itself, the learner herself, and the environment in which the learning is taking place.

I. A Model of the Career Change Process

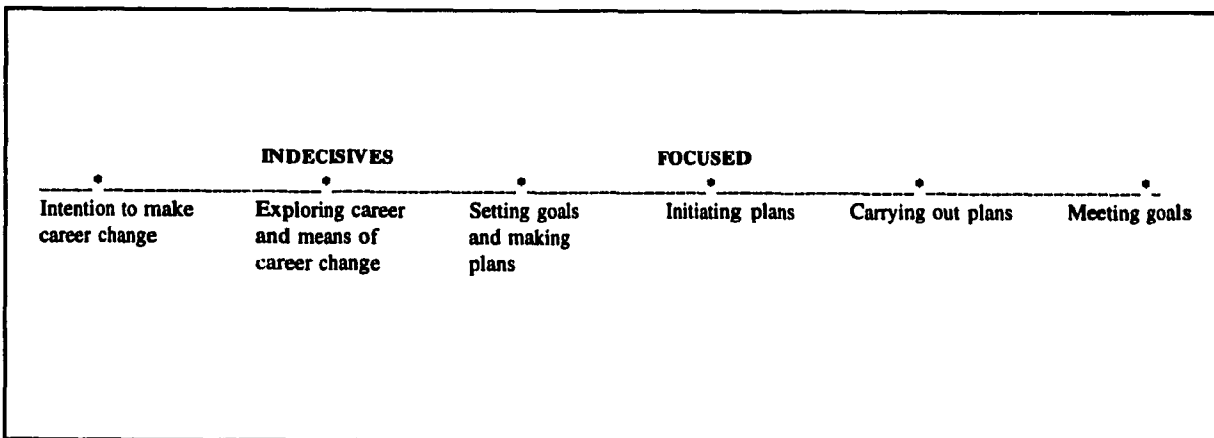


Table 2 - Career Change Process

As the model shows, participants began their career change process with an Intention to make a career change. The next step was Exploring a career of choice, and contemplating a means of doing this, in this case, OLA. Most of the Indecisives were at this point in the career change process, and it here that they made their transition back to school. Their intentions were to explore a field that attracted them, or to reassess their choice of career or choice of distance learning. Many of the Indecisives stopped studying after this point. The Focused had already passed through this point in the process, having explored a career of interest through work or volunteer involvement.

The next step for those who continued was actually Setting goals and making plans for study. Participants talked of getting prepared, of "taking one course at a time" for now and of registering for their courses. Once done, these participants actually made the transition back to school. I call this point, Initiating plans. Most of those with whom I spoke, almost all Focused, were at this point, dealing with the transitional issues of getting back into study, issues similar to those making

the transition in order to explore the field. Some had recently moved into the next stage, Carrying out plans, having successfully made the transition, and were settled into a new routine. The final step in the process, Meeting goals, had not been reached by anyone with whom I spoke. The *Focused* did however talk clearly, positively and resolutely about meeting the goals they had set out for themselves.

II. The Transition

Entry to school as an adult signals a transition in the adult's life. From the literature on transition in general, and the adult's return to school, particularly, we learn about the fragility of the early stages of transition. These initial stages of transition are characterized by varying levels of insecurity, uncertainty, low confidence, stress and anxiety (Beswick, 1987; Schlossberg, 1981; Smith, 1989; Mercer, et al, 1989).

The beginning stages of transition reflected in this study confirm the literature. Women talked a great deal about the stress of this disruption to their lives, of an unfamiliar situation and unclear expectations, and of feelings of instability and uncertainty as a result. It appears that those who were least affected by the transition, had either made a transition back to school recently, were better prepared for re-entry or did not view this as a major contrast to their existing lives.

Those who went back to school recently, actually made the reentry to school then, and thus it seems that transition issues were dealt with at that time. Those who were better prepared were particularly proactive individuals, who had spent a great deal of effort in planning and preparing

for this reentry. It seems that those who did not view this as a major change to their existing lives were those who actually worked in a corresponding workplace.

Goals

A major factor which determines the impact of a transition is the clarity of one's goals (Steltenpohl & Shipton, 1986). That is, the clearer the vision of the outcome, or the clearer the goals, the less disturbing that change will be and the more likely one will be to persist in meeting these goals. A study of an intensive academic advising program at an open admissions institution was undertaken to determine its' impact on attrition. The results reflected the literature, confirming the value of academic advising as a means of helping these at-risk students. "Many (new students) feel as though they are in a tunnel with no clear vision of where it is leading or when it will end. This lack of clarity about academic as well as future goals in life represents a formidable obstacle to overcome. On this subject, the literature is clear: Students who have poorly defined goals are particularly vulnerable and at higher risk of attrition" (Astone et al, 1989, p.41).

It was interesting, then, to note that the most conspicuous feature of the initial re-entry to school in the present study, was the absence or presence of goals. Hence, this was the distinguishing factor which separated the respondents into two groups, those with clear career goals, and those without them. The **Focused** had definite goals in mind and were determined to meet them. The **Indecisives**, on the other hand, were clearly exploring the field and/or were doubtful about the career they wanted to pursue. Given that all but one of those with unclear goals decided to stop studying, and all but one of those with clear goals are continuing, the relationship between goals and persistence in this study cannot be overlooked.

Uncertainty

"(For) the transition person, ...there is a disruption of the illusion of safety. Old 'irrational' fears are co-mingled with the real dangers and real risks of any change" (Gould, 1981, p.44). The insecurity and uncertainty associated with early stages of transition emerge as key issues to be dealt with. In fact, Schlossberg (1981) believes that "perhaps the greatest degree of stress and negative affect is connected with uncertainty (p.9). Many believe that individuals in transition often have uncertain expectations about this change effort and have a sense of being on the outside (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988; Steltenpohl & Shipton, 1986; Lewis, 1985). Through their study and experience with college students, Steltenpohl & Shipton (1986) concluded that "(re-entry students) are strangers in a new world. They feel they do not belong. They feel marginal" (p.638).

Astone et al (1989) and Bean & Metzner (1985) believe that much of the uncertainty surrounding a return to school can be cleared up with academic advising. Astone et al cite poor academic preparation as a distinguishing characteristic in a profile of drop outs. Their study confirmed that student attrition could be lessened considerably through intensive academic advising, including the provision of information and guidance, and help with goal formation. If this is true, the findings of this study deserve note. Respondents in this study confirmed over and over that reentry to school was uncertain for them. They brought up a number of concerns in this respect, including lack of familiarity with distance study, with the chosen field, or with the courses they were following, particularly the prerequisite courses. They were also uncertain about how to study and how to fit the new role of student into an already busy life. A need for academic advising was not suggested by most of the Focused in this study. Having worked in their field of choice, or

having taken career counselling elsewhere, they had no doubts about their goals. Those of the Focused who did have some questions, had developed their goals on their own, following discussion with friends or OLA administration at the time of registration.

The Indecisives, however, did indeed have this need, as some of them declared. Without the availability of academic advising, they either took introductory courses like DENT 100 to help them decide, or they simply checked off their interest on the registration form to "give it a try". Academic advising, particularly for students with unclear goals, was clearly inadequate.

Stress and anxiety

Stress and anxiety are predictable aspects of the beginning of a transition, particularly one which takes us by surprise (Schlossberg, 1981; Dyer, 1976; Spanard, 1990; Boshier, 1973). Participants in this study, too, felt the stress and strain of this transition back to school, and trying to fit study into their lives. Several respondents were anxious or found it "scary" to actually commit to this endeavour, and many found the initial re-entry to be difficult, scary and intimidating. To compensate for this, some decided to start off slowly, taking one course at a time. A different source of stress was the disruption of study to the family and the trouble many had in finding time for study. Several respondents came to the disappointing conclusion that their anticipated completion time would have to be greatly extended.

Some respondents were also experiencing stress unrelated to their study with OLA. They spoke of combating the on-going effects of a learning disability, of being on strike, of facing financial bankruptcy, of dealing with a recent divorce, of struggling to accept a recent debilitating injury,

and of contemplating a move to another province or location. These circumstances further support the notion that along with the transition back to school, many adults are also going through other stressful transitions in their lives.

Many in the study who had experienced anxiety and stress upon reentry, were making progress in dealing with the stress as time went on. These were individuals in the Focused group. Others had not been as successful in managing the stress. These latter participants were individuals who had decided to stop studying, at least for now. Since they also had unclear goals, it is not known whether stress or lack of goals was the stronger factor contributing to drop-out. Since stress was also unresolved for several of the Focused, however, it seems that although it affects a learner, it is the lack of goals which more strongly determines one's decision to continue or to leave.

Schlossberg (1981) examined literature dealing with the personal effects of different crises, like reentry to school, on individuals. She refers to Hill's (1965) belief that "reaction to crisis takes a 'roller coaster' form. The crisis event occurs, the individual 'dips down' into a period of disorganization, gradually rises up again, and levels off into a period of reorganization" (p.7). In this study, Lena's account of her transition back to school concurs with such a description.

"It was a bit of a roller coaster ride, you know, but I found time. So, I scheduled in ... appropriate time to make sure nobody was lacking whatever. So, it was an adjustment at first. Now, it is accepted among (family members)."

Low self-confidence

Low confidence is another characteristic common to early transition. The literature on transition, particularly one back to school, reports that new adult students often enter the learning environment with low self esteem and feelings of inadequacy. They may question their ability to compete and learn. Such feelings are counterproductive to academic success (Lewis, 1985; Steltenpohl & Shipton, 1986; Schlossberg, 1981).

In this study, evidence of low self-confidence was noted in well over half the respondents. The most common sign of it was the reluctance of many to ask for help from the tutor. These new students talked of not wanting to "bother" or "inconvenience" the tutor, of feeling that their questions were "trivial", and of the tutor having more important things to do. It appears that they did not want to question the "rules" of fixed hours, believing that they must adhere to what they were told. When faced with inappropriate tutor hours, only one individual questioned them and subsequently had them changed. Most of the participants, however, chose to look elsewhere to familiar and more readily available sources of help. Another indication of low self-confidence was the hesitation of most in calling the tutor first, some mentioning that they would have liked an initial call from the tutor.

We see then that at the onset of this transition, a great deal was new - study habits, scheduling study into one's life, and course content. Added to this, many dealt with the stress of transition and isolated study and with low confidence. The degree to which they were prepared and familiar with what to expect, however, seemed to have a great impact on the transition experience.

III. The Learner

Roles

One of the most meaningful aspects of the individuals interviewed was that of their roles. Respondents offered information about the number of roles they had, the type of roles, the priority of roles, the similarity of their roles to each other and the places where the roles were carried out.

A great deal has been written about the entrenched role of women as caregivers of a family, a reality which often leads to a woman's decision to study at a distance, rather than in a traditional institution (Kirkup & von Prummer, 1990). Not only is the role of caregiver likely to be a primary concern of women, but women are responsible for other major roles as well, particularly within the workplace. Lewis (1988) notes that "many returning women are pulled in several [and often conflicting] directions by a seemingly endless stream of demands from work, family, friends and community" (p.7). Others agree, and add that "without extraordinary effort, the newer role of student would simply be subsumed" (Redding & Dowling, 1992, p.230).

The women in this study clearly fit this description in the literature of the roles of women returning to school. Without a doubt, family responsibilities took a priority role for those with young children. The only exceptions were those whose children had grown up and were no longer needing their care. These two women talked of finally doing something for themselves, indicating their previous dedication to their role as parents of young children. Most of the women, however, struggled hard to maintain their responsibilities as caregivers. Linda talked of studying after her

children were in bed, and before they got up. She spoke of being sure her children, the housework and yard work were tended before she began work on her studies. Women talked of choosing OLA so that they could be at home to care for their families. Because of this importance, there was no consideration of travel to a college, even a local campus. They had little trouble reducing or eliminating the volunteer work, but would not even consider doing this to their role as caregivers. With this major influence within the study environment of these women, "time set aside for undisturbed study is essential, as it ritualizes the separation of roles" (Redding & Dowling, 1992, p.230).

Integration of Roles

Schlossberg (1981) found that the more the transition altered the mature student's roles, routines and relationships, the more she would be affected. Similarly, in studying drop-outs of part-time, off-campus study, Redding & Dowling (1992) found that the degree to which integration of the family, work and social roles was successful, was crucial to a program's successful completion. A look at the integration of roles for participants of this study exposes important differences in both the structure and the content of the roles.

Regarding structure, the role as a caregiver was not seen as a nine-to-five job. It requires being flexible in responding to family needs on a variable schedule, not a pre-determined one. Respondents talked of studying whenever they could fit it in, and many respondents tried to schedule study time, only to be interrupted. A job in the workplace and volunteer work, on the other hand, usually have clearly set allotments of time, thus making it simpler to schedule in, and

integrate, the new role of student. Results showed that the difficulty of juggling roles was not as great for those with jobs and/or volunteer work outside of the home.

Content of the roles also affected the ease of integrating student life into an established lifestyle. When the content of the roles within the home, work and school differed greatly, there seemed to be several indications of difficulty fitting the student role into the rest of their lives. When similarities in roles existed, however, few expressed a problem in this respect. The most blatant example of this is revealed in the DENT program. This study clearly showed that, without doubt, integration of roles was easier for the respondents in the DENT program. This is not surprising. The content of the study was the same as the content of work. The place of study also was often the same as work. Therefore, the role of student then was not a **different** role for these people, but an **extension** of a work role!

Characteristics

The literature on transition reveals that the characteristics of those best able to cope with a transition include a strong sense of self-esteem, optimism, planning and initiating, assertiveness, and self-reliance (Schlossberg, 1981). From the literature on distance education, we find similar characteristics in those who succeed. They are self-motivated, self-disciplined, well organized and like to work on own (Coldeway, 1991; Spanard 1990; and Robinson, 1992). The characteristics of those who drop out of distance education, on the other hand, include poor academic preparation, unclear objectives, procrastination, poor assessment of needs and poor work habits (Astone et al, 1989; Moore, M., 1979).

Proactive qualities, then, seem to emerge as characteristics of the persisters and copers in the literature, as well as in characteristics of the Focused in this current study. That does not necessarily say that the Indecisives did not have these qualities. This research cannot presume to know all the qualities of all respondents. It can only interpret statements of demonstrated behaviour which suggest certain qualities. Therefore, it seems reasonable that the Indecisives potentially have proactive qualities, as well. I suspect that when one's goals are unclear, one has less reason to be determined or committed, to be resourceful in combatting barriers and to plan ahead. These qualities may just take on a greater influence after goals are determined and one is ready to act upon them. It was true for this study that the Focused were more determined to succeed and to deal with the influences which threatened their goals.

IV. The Environment

During the process of learning, students interact with their environment, whether in a traditional setting or a distance setting. In traditional education, learning happens within a structured "school" environment which provides instruction, resources, tutorial/teacher support, socialization and emotional support from peers and staff. Students take direction from the teacher, seek clarification from the teacher, receive formative feedback from the teacher, and have access to a variety of resources. They socialize with other learners, get tutorial help from other learners, and get emotional support from both teachers and peers. In distance education, however, the learning is 'parachuted' into an existing environment of home or of work. These environments have prearranged time and physical structures to suit their purposes. To what extent do these environments provide instruction, resources, tutorial assistance, socialization and emotional support? The respondents in this study gave answers to this question.

For the women in this study, the learning environment played a major role in the ease or difficulty of making this transition back to school. Studying through distance education, they were necessarily studying at a place away from the school, being either of two places, home or work. For most respondents, especially those in the SSW and BUS programs, the study environment was the home, complete with family members and family responsibilities. A few also took coursework to the workplace or to the library, but home was the primary place of learning. Home was also, for most, especially the caregivers, a place of work, so these two very different responsibilities were, initially at least, constantly vying for attention. Respondents talked of the need to switch gears often, of finding it hard to find time for study or of being bothered by interferences within the home environment.

For these women, study at home meant that they were often pulled by demands related to their other role in that environment. The unpredictability of work at home interfered with planned times for study. Regarding coursework concerns, family members within this environment could provide only limited help with the course content, if any at all. Although almost all respondents felt they were well supported by their families, both emotionally and through help with family responsibilities, many realized that their family had little understanding of what it was like to be studying again, nor of their desire to pursue it. Within this 'competing' environment, then, stress was present and women had difficulty fitting school into these lives.

The study environment was different for those in the DENT program. Not only was the content of both study and work the same, but very often the site of work and study environment were one and the same. Respondents in this program frequently spoke of taking coursework to the dental office to complete and to seek help. This environment provided the student with tutorial help, emotional support, socialization, and application of learning. It seems that when the learning environment was **similar**, or **compatible**, as was the case of those in the DENT program, students had less stress and difficulty in fitting school into their lives. In such a compatible environment, they found people who understood their circumstances as well as their topic of study, who provided accurate coursework information at the time when they needed it, who encouraged and supported their efforts, who provided an arena for application of learning and who made allowances of time for their learning.

Study

Many of the respondents indicated their satisfaction with OLA's self-study materials as a means of instruction, commending their self-standing qualities. Other comments indicated, however, that, upon reentry to school, many of them lacked the study skills to utilize these materials. This can be explained in part by the newness of getting back into study. Study requires a whole new set of tasks from the ones respondents used in a job, so it is understandable that many needed some initial time (and assistance) to develop, or refresh, their study skills.

It is more difficult to explain, however, why only those in the SSW program needed help with study skills. The concern with study skills revolved around vocabulary, such as comprehending the "jargon" (of psychology), understanding english grammar, retaining information and knowing how to study. A possible explanation that this problem rests solely with SSW students, may exist in the fact that SSW was the only program which required the prerequisite courses of introductory English and Psychology, courses whose content was **different** from the core program. The introductory courses for DENT and BUS, on the other hand, were in fact program related. It may be that students were unfamiliar with the content of English grammar and Psychology, and thus found such study difficult. Although this helps to clarify the problems with grammar and vocabulary, it does not explain that **only** SSW students expressed needs for 'how to study'.

An explanation of this may be that the content of study and the act of study are not separate. That is, when one is trying to comprehend the content, one is in the act of studying, and if one is learning content on her own, she is also learning how to study on her own. The study environment of SSW and BUS students, being primarily the home, showed no signs of similarity

in content and provided little or no assistance in studying at the point of reentry to school. Since the initial courses were prerequisites for many, even assistance at work was limited, the business of work being different from the courses. Those in the DENT program, on the other hand, were often studying and getting assistance within their work environment, right from the beginning. Not only was the content work-specific, but students had access to immediate and on-going sources of help in how to study. It seems that they were not left to study solely on their own. It is possible, then, that while one gets tutoring in the content of study, one is also gaining assistance in 'how to study'.

Exams

Far more Focused than Indecisives expressed that they had problems with exams. This is probably because many of the Indecisives had not yet reached the point of doing exams, nor did they intend to. While both SSW and DENT respondents equally had exam concerns, it was interesting to discover that the concerns were somewhat different. The concerns of the DENT students centred around anxiety from not knowing how to study for an exam and not knowing the exam format. SSW students shared these concerns but also expressed great frustration in not knowing what to emphasize in preparation for an exam. One woman had her questions answered by a relative who had taken exams in her program, but most respondents were left to work it out on their own with little or no assistance from their workplace. As with study skills, these needs can be explained in part by the unfamiliarity of many in taking exams. The issue of what to stress for an exam, however, may reflect the nature of distance education. Lack of interaction with the tutors or someone skilled in the field on a continual basis restricts discussion of important aspects

of a course, something usually provided in conventional education, and probably provided by practitioners in the field of dentistry for the DENT students.

Some respondents voiced a disagreement with the practice of having only one final exam for all material covered in the course. They felt that too great a portion of the final mark and too much course material went into one single exam, suggesting instead that more than one exam of lesser weight be given at different points throughout the course. This is an understandable viewpoint. Considering that it can take up to six months for some to complete a course (which was the reason for taking distance learning for some), this is a long time to retain so much information. Added to this is the fact that students were usually reviewing on their own, unguided, and were experiencing exam anxiety. This resulted in a tense situation for those making a transition back to school.

Interaction

The literature provides more than ample evidence of the importance of interaction in study for women. Kirkup & von Prummer (1990), who examined the needs of women studying through distance education, found that women attended face-to-face tutorials more frequently than men, appreciating the opportunity to interact with other students. They concluded that women, more than men, valued both the intellectual and social component of interactive learning. "The women students demonstrate a stronger desire for connection with others during their studies. They overcome a variety of practical difficulties in order to spend time with other students and engage in shared learning...The female 'independent' learner does not enjoy or benefit from isolation" (p.28). It is this isolation during study that becomes a problem for a woman, not necessarily because she is housebound with a young family, but because of a basic personal need to be connected with others. Steltenpohl & Shipton (1986) feel that interaction with, and support from, peers would assist in a woman's transition back to school.

The choice of the participants of this research to choose distance study, then, did not necessarily reflect a preference for isolated study although there were some who liked studying on their own. For the most part, other reasons accounted for their choice. This study showed that, in the large majority of cases, respondents chose distance education for the following reasons:

1. No other accessible institution was offering what was wanted,
2. Distance study would accommodate the hours when they were available to study,
3. Distance study would allow study at home since family circumstances and responsibilities dictated this need.

With respect to interaction, the findings of this study are explicit. The large portion of respondents of this study who felt they had needs for interaction suggests that this aspect of study was, in fact, very important to these women as a whole. Women spoke of being unsure of their ideas and their understanding of readings. They wished they had someone to ask their questions to at the moment, or to "bounce ideas off". They found study "isolating" and "discouraging", and many simply missed contact with people. It seems then that not only did these women have a social need to be connected with others, as the literature suggests, but from the comments, it seems that interaction was a preferred learning style.

Only one individual in the DENT program expressed a need for interaction. She was exploring the field through DENT 100 and had subsequently decided against the program and against distance learning. All others who expressed such a need were in the SSW program. It is interesting that again the study environment played a part. For the DENT students, the learning environment was rich in interaction, satisfying both those who needed social contact with peers and those who needed to discuss the content. Such interaction was more difficult to find for those in the SSW program. They did, however, talk of creating such opportunities within their environments. There were suggestions of ways to contact others taking similar studies and of setting up study groups with other friends in school. The results of this study suggest that

interaction is a significant aspect of study for these women studying at a distance. Since distance education does not offer it, it seems that interaction needs must be met in other ways.

Tutorial Support

Although the distance learning model provides the availability of a tutor, only a few students in this study spoke of the tutor being helpful, and of using this help on a primary basis. It is noted that whereas some were dissatisfied with their interactions with the tutors, many others did little to contact them at all. Although it was up to the student to call the tutor for assistance when needed, many spoke of him or her as being a stranger, living far away and of having better things to do. For the most part, the tutor did not make an initial call to the participants, and many of these students decided not to 'parachute' the tutor into their home or work environments.

Just as many of the respondents sought interaction within their familiar environment, so did they seek tutorial assistance there. It seems that, rather than drawing help from OLA tutors, most preferred to get this provision through familiar sources within their environments. This is not only a self-confidence issue. Given that the transition itself presents a great many new circumstances, perhaps using existing familiar sources of help reduced the unknown.

Another reason for the limited use of tutor assistance seems to be connected with tutor hours. As mentioned, many chose to study through OLA because it was flexible in allowing study at a convenient pace, location and time. Thus, to fit their lives, participants often studied in the early morning, very late at night or at sporadic unscheduled times in the course of the day or evening. Ironically, tutor times were not as accommodating. Since tutorial assistance was often needed

at the time of study, the fixed tutor hours were inconvenient, and thus the flexibility of distance study was reduced for these students.

Emotional and Functional Support

Abundant research tells us of the importance of support networks and interpersonal resources for those making transitions in their lives, as well as for those studying at a distance (Brammer and Abrego, 1981; Danish, 1980; Cross, 1977; Kirkup & von Prummer, 1990). Support is especially important then for those who are both making a transition back to school, and trying to study at a distance. Not only is the family a crucial factor, but members of the workplace and social contacts also provide much needed support during this time. The influence of support is so great that it can be the single determining factor in one's success within distance education (Carrier, 1991; Redding & Dowling, 1992).

Almost all respondents in this study expressed satisfaction with the emotional and functional support they were getting. Their environments provided required support from spouses and other family members, from friends, from professional contacts, from the tutors and from colleagues. This did not, then, seem to be a determining factor in the Indecisives' decisions to stop studying, nor a major transitional problem. Neither did finances and time determine one's decision to persist or not. It is important to note that although lack of time and finances were mentioned as problems for both groups, they were not regarded as obstacles to meeting their goals. Rather, many of the Focused mentioned simply that studies would take longer to complete, or that would find other ways to deal with problems of time and money. The Indecisives talked of time and money problems too, yet they were not looking for solutions to them. Perhaps these issues were less relevant to study for those who were not committed to complete the program. It seems that for those whose goals were clear, there was a determination to confront the problems which might threaten fulfilment of their goals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I. Practical

A. Collaboration with other post-secondary institutions to establish a province-wide network of Open Learning Centres should be promoted. Recently, OLA acquired such a mandate, planning to offer counselling, educational guidance and study facilities through a combined effort with other B.C. educational institutions. Such centres can address many of the needs which surfaced in this study, particularly:

- * career counselling, including self-assessment, exploring fields of choice, and especially goal formation.
- * an orientation to distance learning, OLA and to the new role of student.
- * academic advising and help with registration.
- * brokerage services - linking students with community resources
- * linking students with work sites
- * interaction and discussion with other students
- * a place and space to study, with some technological facilities, if required
- * peer support
- * face-to-face tutorials
- * workshops on pertinent issues like time management, stress management, how to study, how to prepare for exams
- * child care

- B. The Knowledge Network could offer programs specifically targeting the student making a transition back to school with OLA.** Such a program would address 'getting back into it all', including the predictable effects of study on the student's life, and what to expect. Interviews with students could bring credibility to the presentation, and students would realize their situation is not unique and they are not alone.
- C. At-risk students should be identified up front and given adequate attention.** At-risk students would be those with no clear goals, those who have been out of school over ten years and those who do not work in a similar field as the field of study.
- D. A "buddy system" could be encouraged** which links new students with current or former students in order to help new students cope with the transition.
- E. To help relieve exam anxiety, some former exams might be made available to students.** In addition, if the final exam was broken into two parts, administered at intervals in the course, large amounts of course material would not have to be studied all at one time, and anxiety would be lessened.
- F. The transition back to school must be recognized as a fragile time for students.** The O.U. of Great Britain acknowledges the special needs during this time, and addresses them with the provision of a tutor-counsellor. Likewise, it is recommended that OLA consider the provision of counselling, advising and emotional support services in an on-going and accessible manner, through the tutorial function, or in consort with other community agencies.

- G. **Current tutor hours must be adjusted to become more flexible**, especially during the transition period. Flexibility can be achieved by having more than one tutor available at one time, or by the tutor making an initial call to negotiate the most suitable times.
- H. **Tutors should be aware of the at-risk students and what their situations might be like.** This information could be made available from registration information, and from tutors making an introductory call to the student. This initial call should encourage the reluctant student to call him or her as needed and helps to establish a comfortable relationship.
- I. **The tutor/student relationship should be addressed.** Before tutors are assigned to students, they should have an awareness of and sensitivity to the roles and situations of women returning to school. This is particularly so for male tutors of women students. When the relationship does not 'click', students should be encouraged to call someone to be assigned a different tutor.
- J. **Local teaching resources could be used for tutoring the introductory prerequisite courses.** Students can benefit in three ways:
- a. students have access to one-on-one help within a familiar environment in which they are comfortable,
 - b. having help close by slowly eases the transition back to school and gives the student time to adjust during this crucial time, and
 - c. students make a gradual, rather than an abrupt, switch to learning at a distance.

- K. **An orientation package should be developed for all students, particularly those deemed high-risk.** This would provide an orientation to open learning as a study process and to OLA. It would provide information about what to expect of such a transition in one's life, of where to go for certain information within OLA or their environments, and how to compensate for isolated study. It would also provide skill development in study and reading.

II. Theoretical

- A. **More consideration should be given, in both academia and in practice, to the interview as a legitimate and valuable means of needs assessment, particularly when there is a call to explore for new information and to discover the real reasons why students drop out of school.** I am convinced that the interview gave me more information and far more insight than I would have gained from a questionnaire. I make this conclusion based on the kinds of information I discovered. With a questionnaire, I would likely have confirmed what others have (and what I did find in the interviews) that support needs are indeed very important to these women returning to school. Unless I went in believing otherwise, and thus structured the questionnaire so, I might not, however, have discovered that these needs were already well met, nor how they were met. Similarly, I believe that, in a questionnaire, time, finances and self-confidence would be confirmed as needs for these women (as it was in this study). I am not convinced, however, that I would have found out, as I did with interviews, that although these were strong needs, most respondents were finding their own ways of dealing with them, and these needs did not interfere with attaining goals of those who had clear goals.

It should be noted, however, that interviews can be expensive and time consuming, and consideration should be given to the costs of transcription and long-distance telephone calls, as well as to the lengthy tasks of setting up and conducting interviews, and coding and interpreting an abundance of raw data.

- B. Studies of attrition should be cautious about placing all drop-outs into one pot of attrition.** Results of this study brought to my attention that the purposes of OLA and the intentions of those who use it do not necessarily match. OLA's purpose, as outlined in the 1993-94 calendar is to provide learning opportunities for those whose "goal is personal enjoyment, high school completion, a college diploma, or a university degree" (p.4). Some respondents of this study, however, seem to have had other goals. One was to explore a career through the initial courses of the program, another was to fulfil prerequisites for another college program, and another intention seems to have been a trial effort to see if distance education is a good fit for them and their lives. It seems, however, that although these realities may be recognized by staff at OLA, they are not recognized in the statistics. This conclusion is made because one criterion for selection of names for this study was "one whose academic goal is equal to" the various certificate and diploma programs. Respondents, however, confirmed that they did not have the goal to complete a program, but rather an initial course, or courses, with the intentions mentioned.

Although this may seem insignificant, those who did not finish the program, are lost in the attrition statistics, regardless of reasons. Grouping all who do not complete a program provides little information about the causes and thus the solutions to attrition, if required. Looked at in this way, attrition and retention seem to be institutional needs, rather than

individual needs. It could actually be that a 'drop-out' is only pausing, and actually plans to return. It may be too that one has dropped out of a particular program or institution, but is continuing in another way to fulfil career goals. By putting all 'drop-outs' in the pot of attrition, students may not get the appropriate help and provision which they need.

- C. **More studies should be conducted on the look of and the effect of the learning environment for distance students.** This study showed the influence and importance of the learning environment on those who studied at a distance. It would be interesting to replicate this study in other academic settings and with other students and programs.
- D. **Studies should verify the career change process as presented in this study.** If "exploring" is indeed a necessary part of the career change process, it should be recognized in the programming efforts of career programs.
- E. **Similar studies should verify the disruptive and uncertain early stages of transition in the particular transition of returning to school.** The study should verify the factors which hinder or help one's transition within an educational setting and part of the study should examine whether situations improve after the initial stages are dealt with, and what is necessary to help someone successfully advance through the early stages of a transition.

- F. Attention must be given to specific methods of validating a qualitative study, with emphasis on assessing the researcher as a influential tool, and on what constitutes an appropriate sample size.**

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 - Interview Guide (condensed with spaces removed)

DATE AND TIME OF INTERVIEW:

NAME:

PHONE NUMBER:

PROGRAM:

AGE:

EDUCATIONAL LEVEL:

(FILL IN PARTICIPANT NAME AND PROGRAM/OCCUPATION WITHIN GUIDE.)

Hello, _____. This is Anne Miller with the Open Learning Agency.

I've marked this time today for our interview. Is that right? (IF NOT IN AGREEMENT, OR A BAD TIME, SET UP ANOTHER TIME.)

O.K., Are you all set then? (DETERMINE READINESS AND COMFORT AND ADDRESS IT)

Good - I'll start by going over a few details. Basically, I'll be asking you some questions about your experience of going back to school, and what you think you need to help you through it. All together, the interview should take about 30 minutes. I'll be taking notes as we go along, but I'll also be tape recording our conversation so that I don't miss anything you tell me. O.K.? (NOTE COMFORT WITH THIS AND ADDRESS ANY DISCOMFORT)

I'm hoping we can carry out the interview without interruptions, but in case there's a distraction, please just speak up. I'd like you to feel at ease. So, do you have any concerns or questions right now?

O.K., I'd first like to start by verifying the program you registered for. Is it...?

- ____ (BUSINESS SKILLS CERTIFICATE)
- ____ (OFFICE SKILLS CERTIFICATE)
- ____ (SOCIAL SERVICE WORKER CERTIFICATE)
- ____ (DENTAL ASSISTING CERTIFICATE)
- ____ (OTHER) _____

Are you still studying at this time? _____

(If not) Could you explain that? (DETERMINE IF THEY ARE IN BETWEEN COURSES OR HAVE COMPLETELY STOPPED)

We've noticed that students studying at OLA have different plans for where they're going to do their studies... For instance,

- ____ Some plan to complete the program entirely with OLA,
- ____ some plan to take courses at both OLA and a college too,
- ____ and some aren't sure yet how they want to proceed.

As far as you're concerned, how do (did) you intend to carry out your studies? Would you explain that?

Up until you registered for this program, I imagine you already had a pretty full life - with responsibilities, work to do, different activities..... and then you decided to add study to it all. What's the story of how you got started back to school?

What kind of connection is there between this program you chose - _____ -and your work or other activities?

How has (did) your life changed as a result of being a student again?

Now let's look at the program you are currently studying, and what your plans are. When people register for a career program like this one,

- _____ some are really clear about what they'll do when they complete the program.
 - _____ others feel they first need to see what the occupation is like,
 - _____ and some need to see what studying again is like first.
- (CHECK APPROPRIATE RESPONSE)

How about you? What are (were) your plans for this program?

How much did you know about _____ when you registered for this program? How did you find out about that?

After people get back into school and start learning a new program, they often feel there are things that they should have known beforehand. Looking at your own experience, how would you complete this sentence?

"Before I began this study, I wish I had known....."

(IF APPLICABLE) What difference would it have made to your decisions if you had known this beforehand? (NAME IT)

O.K., we're going to switch gears now.

So far, you've told me about getting back to school, and about your program. Now I'd like you to tell me about being a student..

First, I'd like to ask you: Prior to this program, when was the last time you were in school or took a course?

How would you describe that experience?

In terms of your study now, what is (was) it like for you as a student returning to school after a time away? How do (did) you feel? (If unanswered)

You chose to study at a distance with OLA, at least for now (awhile). What is (was) it like for you to study on your own, rather than in a classroom?

As you go through your coursework with OLA, what do (did) you do when you need(ed) help in it?

What sort of help do you feel you still need (didn't get) with coursework concerns?

You talked earlier about what your life is like now that you're studying again. Besides help with assignments - many people find that when they go back to school, they often need different kinds of help or support... This could mean someone to talk to, someone to encourage you, or it could mean help at home, or help with finances.

What about you? What other kinds of support and help do (did) you get as you go back to school? (FROM WHERE, FROM WHOM) What kind of help or support do you feel that you still need (needed, but didn't get?) that you're not getting?

O.K., we're almost finished. I'd like to look at everything all together now... fitting school into your life, being a student again, learning something new, studying on your own - When you look at everything about going back to school - what is (was) your biggest concern? Tell me about that.

So... in terms of your study in this program, where do you go from here?

O.K. - That's all the questions that I have. Is there anything that you'd like to ask me or to add that you think I should know?

O.K., that's it. Thank you very much for talking with me, _____. I appreciate your openness and the time you've given me. You've been really helpful.
Best in your studies. Goodbye.

Appendix 2 - Letters of Request

From Researcher

July 16, 1993

Hello _____

I am an adult student completing my thesis for a Master's degree. I have gone through the experience of returning to school as an adult, and am now studying on my own at a distance. Over the years, I have developed a keen interest in the transitions adults make throughout their lives. For this reason, I am conducting a study to find out more about the transition of going back to school, particularly for women who are studying at a distance.

I strongly believe that in most cases, no one knows a situation better than the one who lives it. That is why I am asking to talk to you. I have some questions about your experience and what you feel you need as you return to school. To do this study, I will be conducting interviews of about half an hour over the telephone. I will tape record our conversation to retain all the information you give me.

I would like to begin interviews as soon as possible. If you agree to participate in this study, please return the enclosed permission letter to OLA. I will then contact you to set up a convenient time for the interview. I assure you that the information you give will be held in strict confidence, and will be used for research purposes only. Once the study is complete, I will be pleased to share the findings at your request.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to call me at 572-7508. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Anne Miller

From OLA Research Office

July 22, 1993

Dear Student/Former Student:

We would like your permission to release your name, address and telephone number to Ms. Anne Miller, a graduate student at Concordia University. Ms. Miller is writing a thesis on "the transition of going back to school, particularly for women who have studied at a distance" and she would like to interview a number of current and former OLA students. A letter from Ms. Miller describing her study is enclosed.

If you are willing to talk to Ms. Miller, please complete the enclosed consent form as soon as possible and return (in the enclosed postage-paid envelope) to Pamela Bischoff, Research Assistant, Open Learning Agency. If you prefer, you can call Pam at 431-3206 or toll-free at 1-800-663-1663.

Your contribution to Ms. Miller's study would be greatly appreciated, but participation is completely voluntary and your name, address and telephone number will not be released without your consent.

Thank you for your time and support.

Yours truly,

**Don Black
Research Coordinator**

Encl.

Appendix 3 - Background of Three OLA Programs

Dental Assisting entrance requirements:

- * applicant must have been working in a dental environment for at least six months,
OR
must take DENT 100 - Introduction to Dental Assisting
- * applicant must be currently working in the dental environment at least 2 days a week

Social Service Worker entrance requirements:

- * applicant must take, or pass the test for, an introductory English, as well as introductory Psychology
- * applicant must have accumulated at least 60 hours of people-oriented volunteer work within a social service agency. This requirement is halved for employees of the Ministry of Social Services.

Business or Office Skills Certificate program is a short 15-credit program which introduces the learner to the field and serves as a foundation program for further certificate and diplomas in this discipline.