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COMPARING THE EFFECT OF SUPPORT ON STUDENT SATISFACTION IN
ONLINE AND FACE-TO-FACE UNIVERSITIES

BY

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The future of learning.

Approval of Thesis

The undersigned certify that they have read the thesis entitled

**"Comparing the Effect of Support on Student Satisfaction in Online
and Face-to-Face Universities"**

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

The faculty-student relationship is very important in distance education. The effects of faculty support to the student have received less attention in the literature. The purpose of this study was to develop a better understanding of how online distance education faculties can provide better support to increase student satisfaction in an online university. Five participants that attended both face-to-face and online post-secondary education at the undergraduate level were interviewed regarding their level of satisfaction with the support their faculties afforded them. The four themes uncovered surrounding the factors that influenced student levels of satisfaction were faculty service and support, student attitude, auxiliary support, and course design and setup. All four themes exhibited positive correlations with the presence of these categories and the level of student satisfaction. The strongest of these correlations was the positive effect that the timeliness and involvement of the faculty has on the increase in student satisfaction.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

With the advancement of technology, learning has evolved from an informal environment, to a structured curriculum delivered in one physical location, to now what is known as distance learning. Distance learning originated in Canada in 1888 when students used correspondence to complete courses at Queen's University (Roberts & Keough, 1995). Today's distance learning practices are more sophisticated, but are often under appreciated by a population that does not believe that it can replace the opportunity that face-to-face learning provides (Palmer, 2011; Roberts & Keough, 1995). Recent trends suggest that distance education will only grow in popularity and that the hesitation by some to use distance learning as a source of education stems from the lack of support provided by institutions in the past (Palmer, 2011; Bates & Poole, 2003).

The faculty of an institution plays a vital role in the prospective student's first impression in any higher education institution especially at the university level (Palmer, 2011). The application procedure for universities may be construed as quite time consuming and exhausting if the proper support is not readily available. It is not hard to imagine that a prospective student may become discouraged and decide not to apply if he/she finds this process too cumbersome. Universities that specialize in only face-to-face generally have the advantage of setting up offices where students may walk in if they need more help. Student experiences with these offices are often less than satisfying and the student must search for the answer him/herself. On the contrary, universities that specialize in distance education are generally bound to operate differently because of the limited modes of communication (Murphy & al., 2010). Online

universities rely more on telecommunications and the Internet thus leaving students to resolve problems without in-person contact with their university (Murphy & al., 2010).

The faculty of a university also plays a vital role in a student's experience (Palmer, 2011; Murphy & al., 2010). Program development and offerings of distance education courses by postsecondary institutions have steadily increased over the last two decades and are growing at a significantly higher rate than the traditional post-secondary industry (Cookson through Palmer, 2011). The increase in a diverse demographic of students demands that instructors and professors provide students with equally diverse learning varieties (Bates & Poole, 2003). Face-to-face universities provide the means for professors to set up in-person meetings with a student when necessary. Distance education universities must rely on technology to provide this same support to their students, but when students are supported properly in a distance education setting, they report a more positive experience for distance education and as a result hold a higher regard for the distance learning task and learning content (Lin & al. through Palmer, 2011). However, the advantage of in-person communication by face-to-face universities may not necessarily equate to students receiving better support.

Student satisfaction has been linked to program attractiveness, quality, and success (Palmer, 2011). "Thus, student satisfaction would seemingly lead to increased student enrolments, both of which would reflect an attractive, valuable, and successful program." (Palmer, 2011, p.25) Faculty influence may contribute to student satisfaction, achievement and attitudes within the educational paradigm (Palmer, 2011). Murphy & al. (2010, p. 128) reported that "because opportunities to meet the tutor are limited and students are working on their own for much of the time, they need to feel able to approach the tutor as and when the need arises." With the increase in enrolment of students in online distance education universities,

understanding the importance of student satisfaction is critical. Therefore, addressing the additional needs of online distance students from their faculty to ensure their satisfaction is equally critical if an institution wishes to attract more prospective students.

The problem is that there is still limited literature on the needs of students from their faculty (Murphy & al., 2010). This study explored and compared the effects of faculty support on student satisfaction in various learning environments. The purpose of this study was to investigate the current support environment of distance learners when compared to their face-to-face counterparts. There are people that may still feel hesitant to enroll in distance learning due to a perception of lack of support and thus the lack of motivation they will receive. Examining the level of satisfaction for distance learners with regards to their support may shed light on tangible features of distance learning and thus increase student enrollment in distance learning institutions as a result.

The literature review explored the origins of distance learning, the evolution of distance learning, the perceived barriers that students feel prior to enrolling in distance learning, the importance of student satisfaction and the role the faculty plays in student satisfaction. It also reviewed statistical methods used in similar studies that examine the use of surveys to obtain qualitative data on satisfaction. The research explored the current level of student satisfaction in both online and face-to-face learning, the attitude of students towards both learning environments and the common themes that arise from the interviews of the participants.

Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this study was to develop a better understanding of how online distance education faculties can provide and facilitate better support to increase student satisfaction in an online education institution. The first objective of this study was to examine if students feel

fulfilled with the support provided to them in a face-to-face post-secondary institution. The second objective of this study was to examine if students feel fulfilled with the support provided to them in an online distance learning post-secondary institution. Finally, the researcher compared the experiences of support provided and facilitated by both types of learning institutions to examine and compare the level of satisfaction of students in order to discover best practices for supporting students in distance learning.

Significance of the Study

By exploring the level of student satisfaction in both types of learning environments – distance and face-to-face – it may be easier to identify what best practices exist in terms of client service to the students. Acknowledging the differences and understanding their effect may allow both types of institutions to provide a better learning environment to their clients: the students. It may also give universities that specialize in distance learning marketable data to increase enrollment rates and mitigate the hesitation of prospective students when considering distance learning as an option.

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

To ensure the results of the study were aligned with its purpose, the study included participants that studied at both a face-to-face and an online Canadian post-secondary institution. Six (6) participants were asked the same open questions during a thirty (30) minute interview that was conducted in person.

Due to the unique nature of each individual participant, the researcher recognized that the study was influenced by a series of factors outside of his control. These factors included the participant's depth of experience in either educational delivery method, the participant's attitude

towards either educational delivery method, and the participants ability to communicate his/her detailed holistic experience in either post-secondary institution.

Definition of Terms

The definition of terms can be helpful to provide some tentative and contextual definitions so that readers gain a clearer understanding of what was intended in the research. These definitions are offered in order to align and clarify the use of terms and enhance organization of shared understanding.

Administration:	An administrative and functional structure (as a business or a political party); also: the personnel of such a structure.
Client Service:	Amenities delivered to a user or stakeholders by the organization receiving benefits or compensation in return.
Distance Education:	Education at a distance provided through online methods – not a separate discipline, but simply a form of education that requires solutions to problems such as the separation of teacher and learner by place and time (Palmer, 2011; Crawford, 1999).
Distance Learning:	Instruction provide to a student via online distance education supported by a Learning Management System (Palmer, 2011).
Face-to-face Instruction:	Education delivered concurrently in the traditional classroom setting where both the teacher and student are physically present in the same location.
Faculty:	Refers to the scholarly staff; those involved in the learning and research processes, including: sessional, term-appointed, tenure-track, and tenured individuals (Palmer, 2011).

Faculty Support: Refers to the direct support provided to the student by the faculty.

Fulfillment: Synonym for satisfaction.

Higher Education: education beyond the secondary level; especially: education provided

by a college or university.

Inclusion: A sense of togetherness or support of an individual by a peer or group.

Isolation: A sense of loneliness or lack of support of an individual or group.

Proactive: Acting in anticipation of future problems, needs, or changes.

Satisfaction: Satisfaction has been characterized as an assessment measure of the

quality of a product, service, or experience and has been linked with

long-term loyalty to, or continuation with, that product, service, or

experience (Donio, Massari, & Passiante, 2006; Fullerton & Taylor,

2002 through Palmer, 2011). Satisfaction in this context will

specifically refer to the quality of a service or experience that is deemed

adequate by the participant.

Student support: Assistance provided by a company or institution to students or users of

its products or facilities.

Support: Give active help and encouragement.

Transactional Distance: Refers to the theory of cognitive space between instructors and learners

in an educational setting, especially in distance education formulated by

Michael Moore.

Summary

It was challenging to find research that explored the importance of the role faculty

support plays on the level of satisfaction of students past, present and future, studying at either

distance learning or traditional face-to-face institutions. One misperception of the inability of distance learning to be effective in a distance learning university may stem from the lack of comparison of distance learner satisfaction to face-to-face learner satisfaction. The theory of Transactional Distance in distance education has been used to identify proper techniques to reduce student feelings of isolation and increase the interactive nature of courses delivered at a distance (Moore, 1993). If both types of institutions are not properly compared using transparent methods, the true status of the distance-learning environment may take longer to understand and thus be underutilized. As a result, it is possible that many students who could benefit from the use of distance learning may choose not to enroll and miss out on opportunities.

With the increase need for higher education for students to stand out to future employers, it is likely that a number of individuals will continue to look for ways to further educate themselves while entering the working world (Murphy & al., 2010). Thus painting a current picture of the distance education environment and the level of student satisfaction may improve its perception and in turn give way to new information that may increase the enrollment numbers for distance learning institutions. Identification of the structures and strategies that maximize student support and improve student satisfaction as a result of faculty involvement will help these institutions be proactive and mitigate any issues that may arise as a result of the inevitable increase in enrollment.

Current literature was reviewed on the satisfaction of students in face-to-face institutions and the perception of student experience in distance learning. As previously mentioned, a topic often reviewed is the adaptation of classroom instruction to online course design and development, with many looking for ways to recreate similar if not better classroom instruction. Although limited research has touched the role of the faculty and their support procedures in

distance learning and face-to-face education, there was limited information available on the satisfaction of student support in either setting. In light of the emergence of an increase in enrollment of distance learning institutions, some may argue that the student level of support by the faculty is higher in a face-to-face setting because of the proximity and physical interaction (Murphy & al., 2010).

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

As the competition for employment in Canada continues to increase, the number of students enrolling in post-secondary will also increase (Leclaire, 2010). Students are continuously paying for university education hoping that their hard work and time will afford them the skills, knowledge and abilities to better compete in the working world. As a result, universities may now be looking for ways to increase the attraction of prospective students to their institution, while at the same time accommodating for the increase demand without compromising the quality of services and support offered to their students. In addition, "as the distance education field matures it is to be hoped that greater attention will be paid to variables besides the communication media, especially the design of courses and the selection and training of instructors and the learning styles of students" (Moore, 1993, p.24). As such, student satisfaction is an important area of discussion related to the maturation process of the distance-learning environment. The effort placed on improving student satisfaction is in the best interests of both the distance learning and traditional face-to-face institutions, as the lack of satisfaction may have considerable repercussions. These repercussions may include student attrition, hesitation to enroll in future programs and an overall lack of student participation (Fozdar & Kumar, 2007).

Although many factors influence student satisfaction, support offered by the university faculty may have the greatest impact. In distance education universities the transactional distance, which relates to cognitive space between instructors and learners in an educational setting, has a great impact on the student (Moore, 1993). This section will review and discover

the critical points of current knowledge surrounding substantive findings of student support

satisfaction in higher educational institutions. More specifically, this review will explore the

current literature about student perception of support that both face-to-face universities and

distance learning universities that deliver education from a distance provide. The goal was to

discover the literature that has been published on the topic of how well students are supported by

their faculty when comparing the two types of educational delivery methods: online or face-to-

face.

It was difficult to locate research focused on the role of faculty support on the level of

student satisfaction within universities, whether they are face-to-face universities or distance

education universities. However, Umbach & Wawryznski (2005) touched on it when they stated

that "institutions where faculty engage students in and out of the classroom and place a high

priority on enriching educational experiences had students who felt supported and were active

participants in their learning." By determining what variables researched influence positive and

negative attitudes towards distance education, researchers and administrators may become more

informed regarding strategies to enhance student satisfaction levels and program quality (Palmer,

2011). More research on this topic would inform students on the possible advantages that certain

university delivery methods have when compared to others, but the literature reviewed

highlighted the areas of need and possible problem areas for students. A lack of knowledge may

contribute to the hesitation of students' willingness to try new forms of education such as

distance learning. Moore (1993, p. 27) noted that "when a program is highly structured and

teacher-learner dialogue is non-existent the transactional distance between learners and teachers

is high." Palmer (2011) states that when students were dissatisfied with distance education and

its associated characteristics, they report negative emotionality and stress about their online

experience. Therefore, if the opposite paradigm is assumed, satisfied students come from distance learning institutions with low levels of transactional distance.

The following section explored topics such as the theory of transactional distance, the perception of support, the effect of faculty support on student retention in distance education universities and the difficulty surveying students for performance indicators on current support initiatives.

The Theory of Transactional Distance

Dolan (2009) disputed that computer-mediated communication cannot be counted on for rapid feedback. This stems from the necessity of the institution and its staff to use more limited methods of communication (Dolan, 2009). If this paradigm is true, it is significant because students in distance learning "particularly valued tutors who were well organized with their records and materials and responded quickly to queries." (Murphy & al., 2010, p. 129) However, if this is a misperception and many online experiences show that the computer-mediated communication provides more rapid feedback to students when they need information regarding future courses, current assignments and administrative procedures, an argument can be made that distance learning is a valuable medium for achieving satisfied students.

Successful teaching at a distance depends on the institution and the individual instructor providing the appropriate opportunities for dialogue between teacher and learner (Moore, 1993, p. 27). If the instructor must communicate via e-mail, it may become second nature for him/her to frequently respond to their students to avoid filling their inbox, and subsequently falling behind. Dolan (2009) also noted that it is not rare to find individuals that are frustrated and discouraged in the absence of the social cues that occur in a face-to-face environment. Dolan (2009) proposes that face-to-face interaction increases student motivation and that trust is limited

or non-existent in its absence. However, the dependency on face-to-face interaction in today's fast-paced environment may limit the amount of interaction possible when using other methods of communication found in distance learning universities such as student forums, e-mail and synchronous group conferences where other teachers can be involved.

Palmer (2011) suggests that faculty may influence student achievement and attitudes within the educational paradigm. A strong sense of support and affiliation from his/her institution will have a great impact on student motivation (Murphy & al., 2010). Inversely, by studying off-site it is thought that telecommuters or distance learners are missing the spontaneous discussions that can enrich their learning and development (Dolan, 2009). This theory may not consider the current level of service provided to students attending a face-to-face university. With bloated classrooms and teachers focused on research, it is fair to wonder if the focused investments in limited communication that distance educators and learners rely on has, in turn, improved their student service levels. Although the type of interaction may be more limited, this does not necessarily reflect the efficiency and frequency of service.

The Perception of Support

The term support refers to giving active help and encouragement (Merriam-Webster, 2012). Throughout the review of the literature, support in an educational context tends to manifest itself in a variety of different ways on a variety of different levels. Jacklin & Le Riche (2009) noted "sometimes the term 'student support' is used to refer to a very specific aspect of support." In their example, a search of 'student support' using a reputable search engine brought up the area of financial support. In addition to financial support, support in a higher education context can relate to learner support from the faculty. The encompassing characteristic of the use

of the term support is that the student tends to encounter a problem and needs help from the services provided by the university (Moore, 1993).

"Having planned or been given a curriculum, a program of content to be taught, course designer and instructors must stimulate, or at least maintain, the student's interest in what is to be taught, to motivate the student to learn, to enhance and maintain the learner's interest, including self-motivation" (Moore, 1993, p.29). This paradigm suggests that student support extends beyond the initial registration phase and class introduction. The trend that the student demographic will continue to grow in numbers and in diversity reiterates the fact that universities will need to be proactive and adaptable to their service (Leclaire, 2010; Palmer, 2011). Tait (2000) identified a series of three main functions of support which include cognition (supporting learning), affection (ensuring a supportive environment) and systemic (ensuring effective administrative services). The effort and delivery in these three areas are responsible for increasing the level of student satisfaction in both distance and face-to-face higher education institutions, as well as reducing transactional distance in distance learning institutions (Moore,1993). Jacklin & Le Riche (2009) discuss the novel idea of including students in the responsibility of providing support to other fellow students to meet the increase demand and complexity. It would be useful to identify which type universities currently mirror this principle, and how each one is planning and organizing for future demand.

A change in the support paradigm may likely reduce the burden of increased external resources of support such as external tutors, but ultimately may not replace support in exceptional situations where certain students require specialized help. The institution must ensure the provision to the learners of the learning materials, direction and tools necessary to succeed (Moore, 1993). Despite these instances, Jacklin & Le Riche (2009) insist that this

paradigm shift where students become increasingly more involved in support will foster a culture that may fill the gaps where tutor, teacher and administrative support are unable to meet.

The Use of Support for Student Retention in Distance Learning Universities

Universities are continuously researching issues on student retention in order to reduce the drop out rate. The flexibility that distance learning universities offer may also contribute to a higher drop out rate among those types of universities (Nichols, 2010). Rovai's contribution (cited through Nichols, 2010) acknowledges that institutions are able to influence student persistence, despite the misconception that student determination is out of their control. In order to identify which students would benefit from greater support services from the university to reduce the transactional distance, it may be beneficial to research individual student characteristics prior to acceptance in to higher education programs (Nichols, 2010). "By manipulating the communication media it is possible to increase dialogue between learners and their teachers, and thus reduce the transactional distance" (Moore, 1993, p.25). This pre-screening of students may also contribute to identifying which student support services can have the greatest impact on improving student success and satisfaction within their program. The importance of satisfaction was observed by Palmer (2011) when she stated that student satisfaction is linked to student enrolment and success, student retention, faculty involvement in distance education, and program development and quality.

Nichols (2010) noted that distance learners are themselves more independent or under greater time restrictions and as such may not seek comprehensive support services offered to them. As a result it is important to discover and determine which type of services have the greatest impact and which demographic has the tendency to seek out support services whether they be administrative or from the instructor. Despite the potential for a need for increased

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attention to those that are more at-risk of drop out, students that are considered to be a low risk must also have support readily available should they need it.

Nichols (2010) noted in his study that although student retention issues are vastly complex, the inclusion of support interventions – such as orientation courses, general messages of support and personal contact - attributed to an increase in student retention rates in the Center for Distance Learning program at Laidlaw University. He also found that student acknowledgement of support being a factor in being a determinative of their persistence in study was low. This increases the need for exploration in to the factual data to identify strategies to improve and strengthen student retention and increase marketability to prospective students.

Herzberg (as cited through Nichols, 2010) describes a two-factor theory which suggests that the view of support services in distance education can be explained either by suggesting that something being absent has a different effect from that same thing being present. If support services are not sufficient it may have an inverse impact on the positivity of student behavior toward the distance learning (Palmer, 2011). On the contrary, if the support provided to students is adequate they may be less likely to attribute this success to the support. Support systems put in place that may not seem apparent might typically be under appreciated in either setting. Without proper attention to the support systems that work and understanding why they work it is difficult to allocate further research or resources to improve them or introduce them to universities - whether they be distance or face-to-face - lacking their presence. Which highlights the increased need for the exploration of the subject in order to obtain the factual data previously mentioned. Efficient student support services – administrative or teacher faculty – based on sound interventions will contribute positively to student retention and satisfaction (Nichols, 2010). Further more, the promotion of the success of interventions that have increased student support

satisfaction may have the ability to increase the attraction of a university whether it be face-to-face or distance learning based.

Difficulty Surveying Students Regarding Support

Most of the literature with regards to student satisfaction of their respective institutions relate to the quality of instruction provided to them by the teaching faculty. This literature is more often than not used primarily by the teachers to improve the quality of teaching (Beran et al., 2005). In a study by Beran et al. (2005), students were surveyed regarding their level of satisfaction with the responses to their questions as well as student level of satisfaction with support materials. Despite the feedback presented, teachers responded that the data were not enough to change these specific parts of their courses. This is evidence of the paradigm where students are not perceived as the client, but more as the source of funding. It is common knowledge that in any respected business client satisfaction is of the upmost importance to ensure that the business continues to receive future clients. However, higher educational institutions in this case are admitting that the feedback has little effect on the future way they perform their business (Nelson, 2006). With the shift to more student-centered learning it may be wise for faculties to allow data obtained from such surveys to drive the structure and delivery of the learning and learning support. Otherwise, one can speculate that universities may see a change in student enrolment in programs and services that do not accommodate them.

Student ratings tend more often to be used to identify quality of teaching, awards and recognition, faculty merit, promotion and tenure, but not increase its student support services (Beran & al., 2005). The use of this survey could be tailored to identify the strengths and weaknesses of support provided to students by teachers and the administration. The data of this study could then provide a comprehensive outlook on current climate of support offered to a

student by universities. Improvement on the weaknesses discovered in the outlook of the support

they offer would provide universities with direction on how to increase the attractiveness of their

universities.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Research Methodology

The purpose of this research was to explore and compare the level of satisfaction of student support provided to students in two higher-learning environments: online distance learning and face-to-face. The researcher interviewed a total six students who studied in a face-to-face post-secondary institution and then studied via distance learning. For the face-to-face requirements, students had studied at a Canadian accredited post-secondary institution learning through a combination of in class lectures, group work and assignments. Students had also attended post-secondary courses at Athabasca University via online distance learning. The distance learning was conducted using a learning management system and through the access of an instructor or a tutor via online communication methods: e-mail, web conferencing, discussion forums, etc.

The research was conducted through a qualitative research approach. The use of a qualitative approach encompasses "different philosophical assumptions, strategies; and methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation" (Creswell, 2009, p. 173) than quantitative analysis. In the early stages of qualitative research, researchers were required to provide reasoning and justification for the use of a qualitative methodology to be recognized by their peers (Creswell, 2009). However with the improvement of the methodology and the results its research have provided in bounded systems such as student support from his/her faculty, qualitative research has become more accepted in the academic community (Creswell, 2009).

It is hoped that the insights of this study will open avenues to the researcher and his peers to current best practices in both distance education and face-to-face institutions. If these institutions are able to better relate to the needs of the students identified through the case study, it in turn may potentially lead to a better level of student satisfaction overall.

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher interviewed six (6) individuals who attended face-to-face post-secondary courses from an accredited Canadian institution and then attended post-secondary courses at Athabasca University, an online post-secondary Canadian institution. The face-to-face institutions provided the students with face-to-face learning and offered in-person opportunities for students to seek support from their faculty. Participants then enrolled in a course from the online post-secondary institution. Choosing six (6) students that received both methods of instructional delivery to interview allowed the researcher to observe and compare the themes that arose. Each interview lasted no longer than thirty (30) minutes and was conducted in a manner that asked the participants open questions to stimulate dialogue revolving around their individual experiences of the course. The use of live face-to-face interviews, as opposed to e-mailed interviews, enabled the interviewer to observe the genuine reactions, emotions and non-verbal cues of the participants' while they relived their experiences in either educational approach (Brown, 2008).

Case Study Methodology

The study followed a case study approach. Case studies are typically used to describe an actual situation that has or is happening (Mauch & Park, 2003). The results of a case study allowed the researcher to identify and understand problems in the context of educational differences in the various methods of delivery (Creswell, 2009). This task was accomplished by

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asking open-ended questions and giving respondents time to elaborate on their experiences. Dolan (2009) deemed case studies the most effective way to gain a significant amount of information, and to understand participant stories and analyze their possible meanings. A case study research involves the study of an issue explored in one or several cases bounded within a system (Creswell, 2009). In this circumstance, the bounded system was the course and the cases refer to the different experiences of each individual in the system. In addition, an advantage of the interview is that it allowed the researcher to control the line of questioning and to provide historical information of the study. The researcher also allowed the line of questioning to continue on a path not initially intended to further understand any phenomenon that was not expected. This was also useful because the participants could not be directly observed in the educational environment (Creswell, 2009). During the interviews, participants needed time to remember and reflect upon experiences that they had not thought about for some time. The participants often were able to express the emotions they felt when they were asked probing questions that were not initially planned.

The use of interviews was accompanied by certain limitations. These limitations included information provided in a non-natural field setting and the requirement for information to be filtered through the lens of the interviewer (Creswell, 2009). This non-natural field setting refers to the researcher's requirement to conduct the interviews outside of the in-class setting or during the instances that the participants' request support. The researcher took steps to ensure that the line of questioning did not reflect any of his own personal views on the educational delivery methods observed in his past experiences.

For this study a purposive sampling procedure was used. Purposive sampling groups participants according to preselected criteria relevant to the particular research question (Mack &

al., 2012). The sample size initially included six (6) participants who participated in both educational delivery methods. Purposive sampling has been known to be successful when data review and analysis are done in conjunction with the data collection. In this case, the data review and analysis were done in conjunction with the data collection (Mack & al., 2012). The researcher interviewed all six participants, transcribed the recordings of the eligible participants, coded the transcripts and then analyzed the codes and themes. During the interview of one of the participants, the researcher realized that one of the participants was not in fact eligible for the study due to his online education institution. In consequence, his results have been omitted from the research study.

This qualitative study used a series of interviews that explored student's level of satisfaction with the support they received from their departmental faculty. Students were interviewed in person. Each question was asked to the participants in a similar manner with the goal of stimulating a conversation instead of trying to create an expected answer. These questions can be found under instruments in Appendix 2. The questions helped guide the researcher during the interview by fostering clarity and setting the parameters.

Data Recording Procedures

Interviews were recorded using a digital recording device and then transcribed by the researcher. The transcriptions of the interview were then subjected to coding. The coding procedure uncovered common responses and feelings that the students expressed in their interviews. Data coding is "a systematic way in which to condense extensive data sets into smaller analyzable units through the creation of categories and concepts derived from the data" (Lockyer 2004 cited through True & al., 2008). The coding method was chosen because it is used as a "process by which verbal data are converted into variables and categories of variables

using numbers." (Bourque 2004 cited through True & al., 2008) Coding can be used in order to generate a theory (inductive), multiple categories and multiple codes after examining the collected data (True & al., 2008).

Coding method can also be used to refine categories discovered in the transcripts. This refinement starts at the open level where data is broken down, compared and then categorized. Data can then reach the axial level where the researcher begins to make connections between categories after open coding. The selective method allowed the researcher to select the core categories, explain the relationships and relate them to other categories (True & al., 2008). Finally, "coding facilitates the organization, retrieval, and interpretation of data and leads to conclusions on the basis of that interpretation" (Lockyer 2004 cited through True & al., 2008). The coding from an axial level enabled the generation of overarching themes that encompassed common matters of all of the participants

Data Analysis And Interpretation

The data analysis process required conducting investigations that allowed the researcher to delve deeper in to the responses and themes of the feelings and sentiments that the participants expressed (Creswell, 2009). Upon completion of the transcription of interviews in to text on a word processing software program, the researcher read all five of the individual participant transcripts to ensure that there were no errors or inconsistencies with the transcribing process. A second reading was completed with the goal of discovering common words and phrases in order to develop an idea of what codes would be compiled. A third read over was then completed. During the third read over the researcher began coding the transcripts by using key common words to indicate important reoccurring sentiments and topics highlighted by the participants. A fourth read over was conducted to verify that all common sentiments and topics were captured

and accurately coded by the researcher.

Upon completion of the coding process, the codes were compiled in a spreadsheet. Each participant had his or her own spreadsheet with their respective codes identified from the transcripts. Instances of codes were then separated dependent upon the instructional delivery methods: face-to-face and online distance learning. The researcher discovered that common codes were used for identical topics and issues, but were not necessarily accompanied by the same sentiment. For example issues surrounding the presence of an education community were prevalent, but often a sentiment in one instructional delivery context differed from that in the other instructional delivery context. Consequently, single codes were then subdivided in to a positive or negative sentiment column depending on the context of its occurrence. This subdivision provided a better description of the origin of the code and allowed the researcher to further understand the common experiences that the participants discussed.

These responses and themes attributed to creating a bigger picture on what the current status of student satisfaction is in relation to the educational delivery methods. Creswell (2009) notes that the analyzing of data involves collection of open-ended data from the interviews and developing tangible interpretations. The data collection process allowed the researcher to analyze and interpret the data in order to produce a detailed description of the individual experiences. These descriptions enabled the researcher to analyze the data for themes and issues.

The experiences of the participants were analyzed and then compared to each other in a single spreadsheet. The process of analysis is described below.

The first analysis separated the different experiences that students encountered within each method of educational delivery. The codes of the participants were drawn, and then separated in to a face-to-face coding group and an online group. This allowed the researcher to

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set up for the instructional delivery method comparison. Codes that could be classified in the same category were grouped together under the same code to eliminate redundancy. The total number of negative and positive codes was compiled to further differentiate between the nature of the experience noted by the participant. The codes were also grouped into similar categories dependent upon nature of the issue and the sentiment. Each category was then given a name based on the overarching theme it touched on. In total four thematic groups were identified: Faculty Service and Support, Student Attitude, Auxiliary Support, and Course Design and Setup. These thematic groups will be described in detail in the next chapter.

The first analysis was followed by a comparison of what the literature has observed in terms of the keys to higher levels of student satisfaction: the purpose of the study. This comparison was examined with regards to adequate support for the education delivery methods relating to the four dominant thematic categories identified in the first analysis above. The literature furthered the validation of the researcher's decision to classify and categorize the four main themes. The validation by the literature is expanded in the next chapter. Similar instances expressed by the participants were found throughout the described literature.

Finally, the last analysis explored the variances of the level of student satisfaction between both educational delivery methods by comparing the similarities and differences of each other. The culmination of these steps, with an emphasis on the final comparative analysis, provided insight to the researcher on what the current comparative level of support is in each delivery method according to the participants, and what institutions can do to improve their service and support to their clients: the students.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity are known for their necessity in quantitative research studies.

They are both also necessary in qualitative research. The verification of the accuracy is found by employing certain procedures which allows for the research to obtain qualitative validity, while the consistency of the researcher's approach across different researchers and different projects indicates the level of qualitative reliability (Creswell, 2009).

In order to achieve qualitative reliability, it was crucial that the researcher verify the transcripts to ensure that they did not contain obvious mistakes during transcription and that there was little variation in the definition and utilization of codes (Creswell, 2009). Careful attention was paid by the researcher and other reviewers to ensure that these mistakes were not made.

In order to ensure that qualitative validity was met, the use of data source triangulation and member checking was included. Researcher bias clarification was also used to ensure that the presenting of negative or discrepant information was validated. The researcher also consulted peers to ensure the accuracy of the information and had an external auditor review all relevant information (Creswell, 2009).

Authenticity and Verifiability

Because of the reliance on the researcher's interpretation of the participant interviews, it was clear that a strategy was needed to promote transparency in the study. With the case-study format it was important to verify the content of the interviews to ensure that the findings reported were authentic. Collins & al. (2013) divided authenticity in to five categories: fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity, and tactical authenticity. The researcher used the criteria from the fairness category of authenticity. "The fairness criterion reflects the degree that data are inclusive of participants' constructions and underlying values." (Collins & al., 2013, p. 274). Authenticity and verifiability were hallmarks of this qualitative

research. Fairness can be achieved through the use strategies that verify the data. To accomplish this the experiences of the interviewees were recorded and transcribed. Notes were also taken during the interviews to further describe the emotional context of certain experiences. During the process of data analysis the researcher triangulated all three sources of data to ensure that the events and their accompanying emotions and intentions were accurately analyzed and verified. This allowed for the research to ensure the authenticity of the reported findings.

Research Sample

The first step was to identify the individuals for the proposed study. Six individuals who attended face-to-face courses from a recognized Canadian post-secondary institution that have successfully completed a course were interviewed. In addition, these six (6) students had attended post-secondary courses through Athabasca University via online distance learning. This allowed for the observation of the experiences in order to uncover themes that the respondents raised both dependently and independently of the method of instruction. The data collection in this case study drew on the responses from the cases of each of the six participants. The five cases used provided light through the *embedded analysis* the aspect of support faculty (Yin, 2003 through Creswell, 2009). The interpretation of them provided meaning into the current environment of faculty support when comparing and exploring online and face-to-face institutions.

Recruitment Process

A message was sent out to members on the social networking website Facebook asking for those who knew individuals who had attended Athabasca University undergraduate courses and other undergraduate courses from a Canadian face-to-face post-secondary institution. Associates of the researcher responded and provided names of professional colleagues that met

the educational requirements, were aware of the purpose of the study and were interested in participating. The Invitation to Participate (Appendix 3) was sent to eligible participants that responded to a preliminary message request sent by the researcher who was also the principal investigator. The e-mail included additional information concerning the research study as well as the requirements for participation in the study. Participants were also advised that their participation would remain anonymous.

It was normal for participants to have difficulty remembering certain support experiences in their face-to-face institutions because they had attended their face-to-face institution prior to their online institution. To mitigate the effects of this circumstance, the interviewer listed off the different methods of support: office hours, after class, discussion forums, e-mail, telephone, etc. This allowed participants the time needed to recount their experiences and reduce the depth of the deficiencies of information that the time lapse may have caused.

Summary

This study used an interview process to gather information to compare student experience in two different instructional methods at the undergraduate level, as well as identify and explore the best practices of faculty involvement that lead to student satisfaction. Subjects were students, past and current, who studied at a face-to-face post-secondary institution and then studied undergraduate level courses at Athabasca University. Of the six participants who were interviewed, only five participant interviews were used based on eligibility of the study. The audio portion of these interviews was digitally recorded and then transcribed by the researcher/interviewer. Terms relating to faculty involvement, student experience, student satisfaction and technological involvement in the transcripts were identified and coded in to sub-categories. Using three separate phases of analysis, the researcher assembled the various sub-

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categories in to four overarching thematic codes, compared them to the current literature

surrounding student support and satisfaction, and provided linkages in a comparative phase of

analysis.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Interview Results

All six respondents who agreed to participate in a face-to-face interview participated. All six participants also lived in Ottawa, Ontario. Of these respondents, all six had attended a face-to-face Canadian post-secondary institution, more specifically a Canadian university. However, only five had attended an undergraduate course at Athabasca University through online distance learning. The sixth participant had attended and completed a Master of Business Administration degree through online distance learning at a university located on the Canadian east coast. As a result, none of the participant's experiences were used. Despite the removal of the sixth participant, the researcher felt comfortable with proceeding with the information obtained from the remaining five participants. Their interviews contained diverse detailed information and experiences sought after for the purpose of the study.

A description of the six participants is given, including what post-secondary institutions they attended, the face-to-face undergraduate programs they registered for and their reasoning for attending an undergraduate course or program at Athabasca University. The focal point of this section will describe the experiences of the participants in both institutional settings: face-to-face and online. This section recited the factors listed by the participants that affected their need of support, use of support and support experience in both academic situations. Finally, this section concludes with the most important factor of support, student level of satisfaction with support, and how it will affect the participants' decision for attaining future educational

qualifications. Although the participants' programs are listed, the names of their undergraduate face-to-face institutions have been left out for anonymity. Please note that the numerical association of the participants' universities do not relate to one another.

Participants

The purpose of this research was to explore and compare the level of satisfaction of student support provided to students in two higher-learning environments: distance learning and face-to-face. Throughout this section, the six participants are identified as P1, P2,…,P6. The use of this identification procedure is to give context to comments from the diverse group of participants while maintaining their anonymity.

P1. Participant 1 attended University 1 and College 1 before turning to Athabasca University's online distance learning. P1 finished an undergraduate degree at College 2. A university based in Boston, but with a campus located in Mexico City. P1 is now completing a Master's of Social Work at University 2.

P2. Participant 2 attended University 1 before transferring to University 2 to complete an undergraduate degree. P2 then took a programming course at Athabasca University, but did not complete it.

P3. Participant 3 attended University 1 for three semesters before dropping out of university all together. He is currently completing courses at Athabasca University in hopes of graduating with a post-secondary certificate.

P4. Participant 4 attended University 1 in Fredericton, New Brunswick. This university was attended in face-to-face. In his final year, the participant attended two online undergraduate courses at Athabasca University in order to graduate with the rest of his peers.

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P5. Participant 5 attended University 1 and College 1 face-to-face. P5 is currently completing online courses in Nursing at Athabasca University.

P6. This participant attended and completed an undergraduate degree at University 1**.** P6 then attended the University 2 online to complete a Master of Business Administration. As a result, P6's support experiences will not be used in the research process.

The Four Overarching Themes

The coding process yielded forty-four separate codes in total. These codes were then grouped together based on their common characteristics. The individual themes are presented and explained below. The rationales for the formation of each individual theme are presented and explained below.

Faculty Service And Support

The first overarching theme was titled Faculty Service and Support. In the Data Analysis and Interpretation section of the Methodology chapter, the student is referred to as the client. The decision to classify the terms below as Faculty Service and Support refer to a common business practice of client service. The popular phrase the *client comes first* alludes to the paradigm that for a business to be sustainable and succeed the client must be served to satisfaction (Somerville & Elliot, 2011). To better position the requirement of faculty involvement in an academic environment of support, the term was modified to Faculty Service and Support. This was the theme with the highest code frequency because of its importance expressed by the participants in their interviews. In total, twelve different codes were grouped under this theme. They are listed below in Table 1.

Table 1. The Names of the Codes for Faculty Service and Support

Face-to-face Support	Instructor Feedback	Office Hours
Faculty Support	Instructor Interest	Online Support
Instructor Ability	Isolation	Outreach by Instructor
Instructor Availability	Language Barrier	Timeliness of Support

The table above lists the names of the codes that emerged in the interview transcripts that were used to create the theme of Faculty Service and Support.

Student Attitude

The next overarching theme stemmed from the sentiments and needs from the student. Building on top of the business terminology referred to as *Client Service* that encouraged the theme of Faculty Service and Support, the next theme was rooted in similar logic and terminology revolving around client or consumer behaviour. The business term was modified to meet the academic environment in which case the clients/consumers are in fact the students themselves. The codes that made up this theme revolved around emotions, expectations and experiences participants described throughout the interview that were dependent on the faculty involvement. In total, six different codes were grouped together under this theme. They are listed below in Table 2

Table 2. The Names of the Codes for Student Attitude

	Student Attitude Towards	
Attrition	Accessing Support	Student Level Of Motivation
Cost Of Education	Student Face-To-Face Experience	Student Online Experience

The table above lists the names of the codes that emerged in the interview transcripts that were used to create the theme of Student Attitude.

Auxiliary Support

The third theme is rooted in all aspects of support provided to the participants that are independent to the faculty instructors. The importance of exploring alternative avenues to achieve adequate support was raised in each of the interviews. Because the alternative avenues of support were not limited to a singular method, the overarching theme was termed Auxiliary Support. In total, four different codes were grouped under this theme. They are listed below in Table 3.

Table 3. The Names of the Codes for Auxiliary Support

Administrative Support	External Support
Educational Community	Peer Support

The table above lists the names of the codes that emerged in the interview transcripts that were used to create the theme of Auxiliary Support.

Course Design And Setup

The final theme expanded on the business principles that followed the first two themes. Each participant commented on the effect of the product design and set up. To shift this paradigm in to an academic-focused theme, the product was referred to as the course and thus the theme was titled Course Design and Setup. These codes encompassed the method required to attend and complete the course, the course expectations established by the institution independent of instructor specific expectations and the technology available to the students. In total, ten codes were grouped together and are listed below in Table 4.

Table 4. The Names of the Codes for Course Design and Setup

Accessibility	E-mail	Variety of Support Methods
Accreditation	Flexibility	Rigid School Structuring
Clarity of Course Expectations	Established Expectations	
Class size	Telephone	

The table above lists the names of the codes that emerged in the interview transcripts that were used to create the theme of Course Design and Setup.

Participant Experience

P1. The first participant described her experiences from all the different universities.

Having begun her post-secondary schooling at two separate face-to-face institutions, it was only when she started studying at Athabasca University that she finally stuck to a specific program before finishing her degree at a separate university through a blended approach.

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The common themes that stood out from her interview transcripts were:

- The value of adding an education community to her face-to-face experience and why she will only pursue her next level of education in a face-to-face instructional environment.

    "I think it's time for me to be in that class for me where I have that community."

- The need for instructor interaction and availability in her online education experience.

    "I feel a bit more motivated when I'm actually there with someone talking about certain issues."

- Her experience when she had close interaction and a high level of interest from her instructors.

    "So that is what I was basically looking for, is that push, motivation and I completed that with excellent grades."

- The need for clear open communication and expectations when studying online, and the subsequent follow-through by the faculty on the established expectations.

    "He was very free and open; it never felt like I had to talk to him on the phone or by Skype… he was great by e-mail."

- Flexibility and openness when choosing discussion topics for assignments.

"I really enjoyed that about him so I had a great experience towards the end of my Athabasca academic career."

When observing her reaction to her face-to-face experience through the lens of the four overarching themes, the majority of her negative codes touched on an absence of help by a certain number of her instructors, a lack of self-motivation, and a need for learning flexibility that was restricted by some of the face-to-face institutions she attended.

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The positive codes in her face-to-face experience revolved around heavy involvement from the instructor to implicate her assignments with community projects, a strong level of motivation stemming from a passion for the subject matter, a strong interaction with her peer community and high level of technology that increased her level of flexibility to study at her convenience.

When looking at her online experience at Athabasca University through the lens of the overarching themes, P1's negative codes are heavily present during periods where she has little or no contact with her instructor, and when costs of mailing assessments and extending course completion dates were high.

Inversely, her online experience at Athabasca University presented positive codes when faculty-student interaction was high, the response rate from her instructor was quick, and when the course design allowed her to travel for business and still complete coursework on time and with ease.

The table below will illustrate the schematic division of the code dispersion found when the interview for participant 1 was analyzed.

Table 5. The Transcript Codes and Frequencies of Participant 1

Theme	Face to Face		Online	
	+	-	+	-
1 Faculty Service and Support	15	4	3	3
2 Student Attitude	2	3	0	0
3 Auxiliary Support	3	1	2	2
4 Course Design and Setup	8	1	5	2

The table above lists the frequency of each code that emerged in P1's interview transcripts sorted between the face-to-face and the online institutions, as well as the emotions in which they occurred i.e. positive or negative (+/-).

P2. Described her different experiences at the three universities she had attended at the undergraduate level. Having transferred from University 1 to University 2, her face-to-face experience came with mixed reviews. At University 1 and University 2 she experienced sentiments such as:

- Having a hard time communicating with the instructor.

  "Some of my professors barely spoke English…"

- Moving to a university whose faculty seemed more interested in the well being of their students.

  "They just seemed more willing and interested in the students…"

- And a university community that she could relate to and share her academic experience with.

  "…a whole cohort that was with me in my class and we could meet up for study groups…"

Her experience at Athabasca University did not end well as she opted to not finish her course to avoid more frustration. The interaction between the instructor, as well as the design and setup of the course left her feeling isolated and uncared for. This is reflected in the statements below:

- When explaining the most difficult part of her experience.

  "It was probably the most frustrating part was trying to get help…"

- When explain why she decided she could no longer continue with the online course.

  "I tried asking for help. I wasn't able to find that help…"

- When not being able to access support in the parameters outlined in the course expectations by instructor.

"It just seemed ridiculous for an online institution to not be timely."

- When describing her attitude toward the experience of online learning for the course at Athabasca University.

"...this is just like the anti-online experience." and "Obviously this medium does not work for me…"

When looking at her face-to-face experience through the lens of the four overarching themes, the majority of her codes reflected a positive connotation to her experience, more specifically with the interest in the students expressed by the faculty.

The negative codes in her face-to-face experience focused on her experience at the first university where she only spent one year due to a lack of effective support and interaction with the faculty.

When looking at her online experience at Athabasca University through the lens of the overarching themes, P2 expressed a high level of dissatisfaction with the timeliness of the support afforded to her as well as a lack of substance with the level of support she received when her instructor finally reciprocated communication. Coupled with a course design that did not offer much in the way of interaction between the student, the professor and the learning activities, she mentioned in the interview that she would look to a face-to-face institution to meet her learning need in the field of computer programming. During the interview she also mentioned the use of a website outside of the university to help her get the support she felt missing.

P2's positive codes were present mostly in the flexibility that online learning afforded because she is a working professional with limited time available for formal education. She also mentioned that the desire for accreditation was a big part as to why she chose to enrol at

Athabasca University after she had completed courses that did not offer the same level of accreditation at an online institution named Coursera.

The table below will illustrate the schematic division of the code dispersion found when the interview for participant 2 was analyzed.

Table 6. The Transcript Codes and Frequencies of Participant 2

Theme	Face to Face		Online	
	+	-	+	-
1 Faculty Service and Support	10	2	0	23
2 Student Attitude	5	4	0	12
3 Auxiliary Support	2	0	0	3
4 Course Design and Setup	2	0	5	2

The table above lists the frequency of each code that emerged in P2's interview transcripts sorted between the face-to-face and the online institutions, as well as the emotions in which they occurred i.e. positive or negative (+/-).

P3. Participant 3 began his education at University 1 in a classroom. Not feeling that he was gaining a positive experience through this institution, he decided to leave the university after only completing fifteen of the sixty required courses in three semesters. His attitude towards this experience are reflected in the comments below:

- When discussing what the effect of a smaller class on his attitude toward seeking support. "...with a smaller class it's much easier to feel as though your questions can be answered." and "…we were in a small class of about 30 people so it made it much easier to get a hold of the professor and ask him questions."

- When explaining his attitude towards asking a professor for support in a larger classroom.

  "...you almost felt as if it was a burden to ask the professor."

- When answering whether he would consider going back to a face-to-face institution after he

  has finished his certificate at Athabasca University.

  "I don't see myself ever going back to class."

His online experience has left him feeling different about attending post-secondary education

and furthering his studies. These feelings are reflected below.

- When explaining why he prefers his online experience at Athabasca University to his

  previous experiences.

  "Well one, it's very fast to get support."

- When answering the question of which experience has left him more satisfied. In this case he

  is referring to his experience at Athabasca University again.

  "More satisfied than I was being in class at University 1."

When looking at P3's experience through the lens of the four main themes we can see

that his face-to-face experience left him with a negative attitude towards large classrooms with

many students. This experience of being in a larger classroom made him feel less comfortable

toward asking the professor for support. However, in instances where classroom size was limited

to "30 people", his attitude reflected a more positive experience and a better relationship towards

support from the professor.

P3's interview illustrated a unique scenario when compared to the other participants

because no negative codes could be detected regarding his online experience. The design and

setup of the course provided him with the tools he felt he needed to complete the assignments.

The auxiliary support methods supplemented the course context and when those failed he was

able to attain support from what he deemed a capable instructor who responded to his question in a "fast" timeframe. As mentioned in the citations pulled from the interview, P3 intends to continue his education without the presence of a physical classroom by using online distance learning.

The table below illustrates the schematic division of the code dispersion found when the interview for participant 3 was analyzed.

Table 7. The Transcript Codes and Frequencies of Participant 3

Theme	Face to Face		Online	
	+	-	+	-
1 Faculty Service and Support	1	0	6	0
2 Student Attitude	2	6	2	0
3 Auxiliary Support	0	0	4	0
4 Course Design and Setup	4	2	2	0

The table above lists the frequency of each code that emerged in P3's interview transcripts sorted between the face-to-face and the online institutions, as well as the emotions in which they occurred i.e. positive or negative (+/-).

P4. Participant 4 seemed to have benefited from both education delivery environments. Having the responsibility of a student-athlete to juggle with on top of school, he found his face-to-face institution comprised of a faculty that was designed to develop strong ties with its students. This experience is reflected in the comments mentioned below:

- When describing the relationship between him and his professors in a face-to-face university.

    "Profs would call me by my name and know who I was…"

- When describing the way teachers approached their classroom in a face-to-face university. "…you could tell that they were in to what they were teaching."

- However, interesting sentiments surfaced when the interview focused on how he perceived the student-teacher/client-supplier relationship and how it impacted his decision to seek support. Often, he did not feel safe enough to ask a question for fear he would ask one that was not relevant.

"You want to treat them almost as if they are an employer…" and "I would hesitate to ask a question…"

When discussing his experience with Athabasca University, Participant 4 felt that his experience had given him an opportunity to finish courses with ease, but also with little need of support from the professors.

"…I really didn't need to access it (support)."

P4 demonstrated a high level of comfort and positive satisfaction in both instructional delivery methods. When looking at it through the lens of the four themes the face-to-face institution provided positive instances of faculty service and support. This was highlighted in the faculty-student relationship and instructor outreach provided by the faculty. The majority of the negative codes resulted mostly from what the researcher interpreted as a negative attitude from the student towards being hesitant and timid to ask for more support from the instructor despite having his positive relationship with the faculty. He also demonstrated a positive experience with his peers and the structure of the course that fostered an openly collaborative environment.

Athabasca University was deemed the ideal institution and method for him to fast-track his learning in order for him to maintain the same graduation date as his peers. The presence of

the discussion forums and the flexibility of not having to be in class enabled him to complete the course requirements with little need to contact the course instructor.

The few negative instances in his experience stemmed from a lack of clear expectations in the assignment the instructor assigned him, however he found that the course-provided discussion forums bridged these gaps well.

P4 disclosed that despite his strong level of satisfaction with his online experience, and his recommendation to his athletic peers to use Athabasca University to keep pace with their graduation, he would look to complete his future degree – a Bachelor of Education – in a face-to-face institution to maintain a higher level of interaction with his peers and the subject matter.

The table below will illustrate the schematic division of the code dispersion found when the interview for participant 4 was analyzed.

Table 8. The Transcript Codes and Frequencies of Participant 4

		Face to Face		Online	
	Theme	+	-	+	-
1	Faculty Service and Support	8	0	3	1
2	Student Attitude	2	3	1	2
3	Auxiliary Support	4	0	1	0
4	Course Design and Setup	9	1	5	1

The table above lists the frequency of each code that emerged in P4's interview transcripts sorted between the face-to-face and the online institutions, as well as the emotions in which they occurred i.e. positive or negative (+/-).

P5. In the final section of this part of the data analysis, the findings from the interview and coding procedure for participant 5 is reported. Contrary to P3, this participant had a better

experience in class having already completed a Bachelor of Commerce at University 1. After taking a few science-oriented courses in class at College 1 in a very supportive environment, she decided to enter a nursing program at Athabasca University. The quotes below paint a vivid picture of both those experiences.

- When discussing how often she reached out to the professor for help.

  "I definitely wasn't one of those students that was harassing them on a weekly basis."

- When explaining how she felt when she received the course material and setup at Athabasca University.

  "I was lost."

- When elaborating on the professor's decision to point her in a direction to seek information online instead of providing a specific answer.

  "I didn't really find that very helpful."

- When explaining how she was able to complete the course and achieve a passing grade despite a lack of support from the faculty.

  "I had to get my own tutor outside of the school to assist me in completing this work."

- Responding to whether she would choose to learn in a classroom or an online environment based on her experiences.

  "If I had a choice I would prefer to go to class."

When looking at her face-to-face experience through the lens of the four overarching themes, the majority of her positive codes occurred when she was discussing her face-to-face professors and their decision to pay close attention to the progression and individual needs of the student.

The negative codes in her face-to-face experience were present in an experience where a professor was heavily interested in the success of the participant, but came off as intimidating and irrational.

When looking at her online experience at Athabasca University through the lens of the overarching themes, P5's negative codes are present during instances of a lack of support and unclear expectations and instructions by the course design. These factors lead to a decreased level of motivation of the participant. These factors affected P5 to the point where she disclosed that she had put her textbook in another room so that she would not have to look at it.

The positive codes taken from P5's interview were drawn from the flexible setup of the course and her ability to study online while maintaining full time employment as a nurse.

The table below illustrates the dispersion of the codes found when the interview for participant 5 was analyzed.

Table 9. The Transcript Codes and Frequencies of Participant 5

Theme	Face to Face		Online	
	+	-	+	-
1 Faculty Service and Support	5	0	1	0
2 Student Attitude	10	5	0	9

3	Auxiliary Support		1	0	1	0
4	Course Design and Setup		2	0	2	0

The table above lists the frequency of each code that emerged in P5's interview transcripts sorted between the face-to-face and the online institutions, as well as the emotions in which they occurred i.e. positive or negative (+/-).

Tally of Codes by Overarching Themes

The range of experiences described by all participants in both educational delivery formats, face-to-face and online vary from one to the next and within the different universities and classes themselves. However, in both cases the majority of the codes related to the Faculty Service and Support. This may be caused by the nature of the interview and the information the researcher is looking to uncover.

Participants often referred to the different levels of interest that their respective instructors demonstrated towards students and how that affected the participants' attitude towards asking for support.

Timeliness of support was also a factor that was discussed in the majority of the interviews by the participants. This also played an important role in the resulting student attitude towards support.

A quick glance shows that face-to-face faculty service and support obtained more positive reactions from the participants than the online counterpart.

Student attitudes were more or less equivalent between positive and negative coding in the face-to-face codes, but there were far more negative than positive codes, 25 to 2, with respected to online distance learning. One interesting factor observed by the researcher was the

participants' views on their relationship with their instructors and how this played a role on their decisions to ask for support. This factor will be explained in greater detail in the next sections.

Auxiliary Support was mentioned more often in the online learning context when referring to technological tools that brought the student to the course or that brought students together. Auxiliary support was also present in the face-to-face portion of the interviews, but revolved more around the peer communities that formed as a result of being in close proximity to one another.

Course design and setup were mentioned with mainly positive examples in both education delivery methods, but emerged from slightly different topics. In the face-to-face setting, course design and setup were catered around the size of the classrooms and the role that played on students asking for support. In the online delivery environment, course design and setup codes were geared more towards the utilization of technology and Athabasca University's ability to design courses with clear objectives and expectations that added to the student's ability to work independently.

Table 10. The Transcript Codes and Frequencies of All the Participants

	Theme	Face to Face		Online	
		+	-	+	-
1	Faculty Service and Support	43	9	14	26
2	Student Attitude	21	22	3	25

| 3 | Auxiliary Support | 7 | 0 | 7 | 3 |
| 4 | Course Design and Setup | 21 | 4 | 19 | 5 |

The table above lists the total number of each code that emerged in all the interview transcripts sorted between the face-to-face and the online institutions, as well as the emotions in which they occurred i.e. positive or negative (+/-).

Comparing the Codes and Themes to the Literature

With the information from the first analysis completed, this section elaborates further on the results of the interviews by comparing them to what the literature has observed in terms of the keys to high levels of student satisfaction with regards to adequate support for those education delivery methods. As mentioned in an earlier section, the literature furthered the validation of the researcher's decision to classify and categorize the four main themes. As such, the comparison of the codes and themes to the literature will be divided amongst the four overarching themes: Faculty Service and Support, Student Attitude, Auxiliary Support, and Course Design and Setup.

Faculty Service And Support

The importance of a proper level of faculty service and support from an institution is a common topic discussed in the literature. As mentioned by Fozdar & Kumar (2007) in the Literature Review, the repercussion of a poor level of faculty service and support may include repercussion such as student attrition and a hesitation to enroll in future programs. This paradigm was also previously touched upon by Moore (1993) when he discussed the theory of Transactional Distance and its relation to student satisfaction due to the cognitive space between faculty instructors and learners in a distance educational environment. In P2's interview, she

mentioned that she felt a high level of separation between herself and the online institution when her attempt to obtain support took weeks to achieve. The faculty instructor did not follow the agreed upon response timelines outlined at the beginning of the course. The level of separation she experienced with her faculty, which could be described as a high level of transactional distance under Moore's (1993) definition, caused her to drop out of her course at Athabasca University. The repercussion of poor support mentioned by P2 led to her attrition, and as mentioned by her led to her hesitation to enroll in future online programs. This phenomenon relates to the consequences that Fozdar & Kumar (2007) warned of when support is low. However, P3 discussed that he had received "very fast" support, which could be described as a low level of transactional distance. This low level of transactional distance contributed to P3's positive experience at Athabasca University versus the negative one he lived a the University 1. As a result, he has decided to enroll in further online courses at Athabasca University and avoid face-to-face institutions when possible.

P1, P3 and P4 individually discussed the importance of timely responses to their queries by their instructors and how that played an important role on how they view online education. The phenomenon that led to a higher rate of satisfaction was highlighted by Murphy & al. (2010) when they stated that students in distance learning "valued tutors who were well organized… and responded quickly to queries." Inversely, P2 highlighted her disappointment with her instructor not being timely especially since it is an online institution, and she expected it to be timelier.

Moore (1993) discussed the important role that instructors play in stimulating and maintaining student interest in what is to be taught and maintaining student motivation. This role was expressed in two interviews when P1 and P3 both mentioned the positive impact on their motivation that their instructors had by maintaining regular contact and timely responses. The

role that that the instructors play in stimulating interest was not present in the situations when P2 and P5 both discussed the absence of the instructor in their online experience and how they had a negative impact on their level of motivation in their courses at Athabasca University.

Tait (2000) and Nichols (2010) both discussed the importance of efficient student support services by the faculty and how it may play a positive role on student satisfaction and retention. This was evident in the interviews as participants trended towards remaining with the institutional delivery method in which they received better support from their faculty. Out of the five participants, only P4 experienced a high level of satisfaction from his faculty in both delivery methods, but felt that his next educational institution would be face-to-face because of the educational community he needs in a Bachelor of Education degree.

Student Attitude

The effect of a student's attitude towards an institution has been shown to have a great impact on their desire to further their education. This argument was highlighted in the literature review when Palmer (2011) stated that dissatisfied distance education students report negative emotionality and stress about their online experience. In their interviews, P2 and P5 both reported negative emotions and high levels of stress when they were dissatisfied with the support they received from their online institutions. In P2's case, she decided to look to a face-to-face institution to attain and complete the education required because she felt that Athabasca University was unable to provide her with the support she needed. Although P5 reported a negative attitude towards the level of support she received from Athabasca, she also decided to continue with the program because of the flexibility the program offers her. However, she was required to hire an external tutor in order to attain the adequate support she needed. This

requirement by the student to seek external support may highlight a gap in the learning activities or support methods of the course.

P1, P2 and P5 discussed the positive effect having close physical proximity to their instructor had on their attitude towards attending their face-to-face institutions. Dolan (2009) discusses this positive effect when he stated that face-to-face interaction increases student motivation through the use of that method of interaction and that trust is limited or non-existent in its absence.

Furthermore, the literature highlighted that a strong sense of support and affiliation from his/her institution will have a great impact on student motivation (Murphy & al., 2010). P1, P2 and P5 disclosed the importance of having a strong sense of support, as well as an affiliation with their educational community at their face-to-face institution, as having a great impact on their level of attitude and self-motivation. Moore (1993) highlighted the need for distance educator to pay greater attention to surrounding the communication media, especially the design of courses and the selection and training of instructors and the learning styles of students" (Moore, 1993). One of the variables that should be explored further is the time importance of support.

Auxiliary Support

Both Leclaire (2010) and Palmer (2011) stated that the student population and diversity will continue to grow and that universities will need to be proactive and adaptive with their services. The need for universities to be proactive and adaptive made itself present in both P3's and P4's interviews when they mentioned that they both benefited from the discussion forums of the their respective courses because the forums provided answers to their current questions as well as provided questions that the instructor's answers to questions by other previous students.

The university's decision to provide questions asked by previous students is an example of a proactive service to provide this information is an example of proactive institutional service in the design and set up of a course with the help of auxiliary parties of support: peer students.

Jacklin & Le Riche (2009) discuss the novel idea of including students in the responsibility of providing support to other fellow students to meet the increase demand and complexity. Jacklin & Le Riche (2009) also insist that this paradigm shift, in which students become increasingly more involved in support, will foster a culture that may fill the gaps that tutor, teacher and administrative support are unable to meet. Both P3 and P4 mention of their online experience the important role that the discussion forums played in solving their questions through the support of their peers. To further Jacklin & Le Riche's (2009) points, P2 and P5 also disclosed the importance of having a community of peers during their face-to-face courses and how that increased the support they received and augmented their level of satisfaction overall.

P4 disclosed the important role that the administration at his face-to-face institution played in helping coordinate his courses while he was also juggling the other non-academic commitments that being a student athlete came with. The support that P4 received helped him complete the required coursework at his face-to-face institution. Nichols (2010) discussed the important role that an administration can play in supporting their students and it directly relates to the support P4 encountered, as this support increased his level of satisfaction.

In addition to P4's experience, P1 discussed the important role that the administration at Athabasca University played by helping her coordinate with her instructors when her e-mails were not replied within the agreed timeframes. This is another example of the impact and importance of support that students receive from outside, and the consequences of its absence.

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Course Design And Setup

The course design and setup is a topic discussed by the literature as its roll pertains to increasing student satisfaction. The interviews of the participants revealed several different aspects of the course design and setup and how that plays a vital role in increasing or decreasing their satisfaction.

The course and setup in a distance learning university, such as Athabasca University, is thought to contribute to a higher rate of attendance among those types of universities (Nichols, 2010). This was reflected in P5's interview when she mentioned that although she would prefer to go to a face-to-face institution, her work situation made it more difficult to do so. As such, the flexibility of learning online at Athabasca University compensated for a lower level of support she received from her faculty. This is an advantage the university must continue to focus and build on.

Nichols (2010) also noted in his study that although student retention issues are vastly complex, the inclusion of support interventions – such as orientation courses, general messages of support and personal contact information - attributed to an increase in student retention rates in the Center for Distance Learning program at Laidlaw University. This idea is reflected when P3 and P4 both frequented courses in which their design allowed the participants to complete the required learning activities, access timely support and complete the assessments with ease independently of the live access of their professor. The participants were able to dictate when and how fast they would work on the learning activities for the course, access asynchronous help through the use of the discussion forums and complete the exams with the help of invigilators in their respective cities. Nichols (2010) also mentioned that support systems put in place that may not seem apparent might typically be under appreciated in either setting. This was apparent in

P4's interview as he seemed to only realize that various methods of support were put in place once they were highlighted by the interviewer.

Moore (1993) mentioned that the course design must stimulate, or at least maintain, the student's interest in what is to be taught, to motivate the student to learn, to enhance and maintain the learner's interest. P2 discussed her experience at Athabasca University with learning activities designed without the use of technologies available to online institutions such as interactive online scenarios she had seen while using an outside resource for support with her programming course. This contributed to a less than satisfactory- level experience and a requirement for her to seek more support. Support that she was unable to receive in a timely or adequate manner from her instructor, but perhaps she could have been provided with the use of more modern technology. She described her distance learning experience as the "anti-online experience."

Comparing the Face-To-Face Support Experience to the Online Support Experience

Up until now, this section has observed, explored and discussed the findings and codes from the participant interviews and then broken them down based on common themes found across the different participants, as well as the different methods of educational delivery. From there, four overarching themes were developed and then compared to the literature where several common linkages were found and discussed. The purpose of the study was to compare the experiences of support between both educational delivery methods. This was done using the findings under each overarching theme in phases one and two.

Faculty Service And Support

The lack of, or an inadequate amount of support and faculty involvement lead to the attrition of P2 from Athabasca University. Inversely, P2 expressed a higher level of support from her face-to-face institution at the University 2.

P1, P3 and P4 all individually discussed the importance of timely responses to their queries by their instructors and how that played an important role on how they view online education. The three of them each received timely and adequate support from Athabasca University. P1 and P4 also felt that they received timely and adequate support from their respective face-to-face institutions. P4 described a positive experience with his face-to-face instructors and their readiness to offer support in a face-to-face environment, which contributed to his higher level of satisfaction with regards to support.

P2 and P5 both discussed the absence of the instructor involvement in their online experience and how that negatively contributed to their level of motivation in attending and completing their courses at Athabasca University. Both plan to attend face-to-face instruction in the future as they received better experiences in that delivery method of education.

Of the five participants, only P4 experienced a high level of satisfaction from his faculty in both delivery methods, but feels that his next educational institution will be face-to-face because of the educational community he feels he needs in a Bachelor of Education degree. P1, P2, P5 all prefer to further their education in a face-to-face environment, although P5 is sticking with Athabasca out of convenience. P3 decided to continue with his online journey as a result of the satisfaction he had with the support afforded to him by his faculty, and his subsequent experience at Athabasca University.

The convenience and flexibility of online learning were key drivers in the increase level of satisfaction to the participants. However, these two drivers do not account for all requirements for high levels of student satisfaction. When support was need by the participants', the timely response and genuine interest of the professor were determining factors in moving them forward in their respective courses.

Student Attitude

The support they received and the ease of access of support affected participant attitudes toward their respective institutions while they were completing their courses. These attitudes varied from one participant to the next, as well as from one institution to the next. A lack of support and affiliation to the university leads to the decrease in motivation and perceived-ability in P2 and P5's online experiences. P2 denoted a feeling of isolation when her faculty and peer community failed to respond to her requests for support. This isolation caused her attitude to be negative and decreased her willingness to continue with the course.

P3 expressed an increase in positivity and perceived ability to complete the courses with the timely and accurate support afforded by his instructor at Athabasca University versus his experience at University 1. The "very fast" support he received from his professor fostered his learning experience and gave him a positive attitude towards completing the courses with the support avenues available.

With respect to student attitude towards the respective types of institutions, P1, P2 and P5 had good experiences and demonstrated positive attitudes towards their face-to-face institutions as a result of the sense of close proximity to their faculty and their faculty's ability to support them in a more personable manner. These participants also all expressed positive attitudes and

levels of motivation as a result of the surrounding educational community of peers at their face-to-face institutions.

P4 exhibited a positive attitude towards the face-to-face institution, but he also described his positive attitude towards his online experience while he attended Athabasca University. He was the only participant to express such feelings in both educational delivery methods.

Participant attitudes were affected by many factors in education, especially when related to support. These factors included the ease of access of support, the cost of education, as well as the experience that the participants faced during instruction. The manifestation of these factors had an impact on other factors around participant attitudes that included student experience, student motivation and, finally, student attrition. When the factors that influenced participant attitudes were positive, the resulting attitudes of the participants were positive. When the factors that influenced participant were negative, participants reported negative emotions and attitudes toward their respective institutions and in two cases led to participants withdrawing from their respective institutions.

Auxiliary Support

This portion focuses on the differences in educational community and peer support among the different experiences had by participants. After reviewing the implications of auxiliary support in the transcripts, the support gaps that may be missing from an instructor can be closed by an institution's administration and fellow student peers. Jacklin & Le Riche (2009) disclose that students should become increasingly more involved in support in order to close the gaps for which a faculty does not have the time to attend to. An increase in peer-support lead to an increase P3's and P4's sense of affiliation to Athabasca University. P3 and P4 felt that the online community positively attributed to support that allowed them to proceed without the

necessity to contact their respective professors. P1, P2 and P5 highlighted the importance of being a part of their respective face-to-face institutions and the absence of that feeling of belonging at Athabasca University.

The administrations played important roles for two participants in the study. Involvement of administration was high for P1 in face-to-face and online. Involvement of administration was high for P4 online and face-to-face. The involvement of the administration helped both participants with the progression of their studies, contributed positively to their attitudes and reduced the work required by the students and their respective faculties to complete the courses.

Educational institutions, such as online universities, should investment in their administrations as well as their collaboration tools to increase the involvement of the auxiliary support parties: administration and student-peers. These two groups reduce the time and effort required by professors to support their students and allows students to continue with their work with less or no interruption. This support may also reduce student feelings of isolation and contribute to an increase in positive attitudes, as observed in the interviews

Course Design And Setup

The course design and setup codes revolved around several aspects in the interviews. The course design and setup that was afforded in an online institution paid dividends to P5 when she expressed the desire to continue with Athabasca University despite having a lower level of satisfaction with faculty support, because of the flexibility of not having to attend class. As such, the flexibility of learning online at Athabasca University made up for a lower level of support she received from her faculty, and a subsequent negative attitude towards distance learning.

The design of discussion forums increased the proactive support for P3 and P4 to continue with their work whenever they met challenges online. Whereas face-to-face institutions

did not provide avenues for proactive support through their course design. Face-to-face institutions may wish to introduce or improve collaborative online tools that students may access outside of class hours to improve the students' abilities to provide and access support from one another.

Orientation classes can be used to educate students on the course completion requirements, as well as lay out the expectations that students should seek from the professor. In some cases, these orientations allowed for better understanding for P1, P2 and P5 of expectations in face-to-face experiences. Online institutions design of course led to several occurrences of leaving P1, P2 and P5 to find out for themselves on how to proceed with the course work. This decreased their level of confidence in being able to navigate the course and complete the requirements.

The more the observed online universities chose to design their courses to enable easy communication between their peers and their instructors, clearly setup and provided laid out expectations for their course activities and assignments, and designed interactive activities and assignments conducive to their learners, the better supported and more satisfied the participants felt.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to investigate how online distance education faculties can provide and facilitate better support to increase student satisfaction in an online education institution. This was accomplished by interviewing participants that had attended undergraduate courses in both face-to-face and online universities, and then comparing their experiences. This section will identify and explain the conclusions the researcher has made based on the results of the interviews of the study.

Conclusions to be Drawn Based on the Findings

The steps of the study were designed to explore and compare the experiences of support that students received while attending a face-to-face institution and an online institution. The goal of this explorative and comparative study was to discover where students experienced a greater level of satisfaction as a result of the support afforded to them. Based on the findings, one student experienced the same level of satisfaction face-to-face and online, three students experienced a greater level of satisfaction studying face-to-face than online, and one student experienced a greater level of satisfaction studying online than face-to-face. Among these five participants, students in the study were more satisfied with the support they receive in a face-to-face institution than in an online institution. Factors that influenced the participants' level of satisfaction were coded and grouped under four overarching themes: Faculty Service and Support, Student Attitude, Auxiliary Support and Course Design and Setup.

Alternative explanations for the findings

The reason for finding that more participants were satisfied with their face-to-face support experience may be that the participants have attended their respective online institutions more recently and have a better memory of their negative experiences from those universities versus the ones they felt from the face-to-face universities they attended in years prior. Participants expressed more difficulty recounting their face-to-face experiences than their online experiences during the interviews. The majority of the participants had not attended their respective face-to-face institutions discussed in the interviews for quite some time, and had either recently completed their courses at Athabasca University or were still studying at the university.

Impact of the Study in Terms of What Was Learned

By exploring the level of student satisfaction in both types of learning environments – distance and face-to-face – it has become apparent what some of best practices exist in terms of client service to the students. Acknowledging these differences and understanding their effects may allow both types of institutions to provide a better learning environment to the students.

The study shed light on several factors that increase student satisfaction with regards to support regardless of the delivery method. These factors include the need for timely support received from the professor, the need for support that offers students an adequate response to continue in their study, the need for professors to clearly outline the expectations of the course content, the course design and the various methods of attaining support with guidelines that the professors themselves adhere to with discipline, the need for students to have forums that allow them to support each other easily and readily, the need for professors to proactively include lists of questions and answers that have been previously asked by former students, and the need for

professors to show interest in the physical and virtual classrooms in order to maintain or increase student motivation and interest in the subject matter.

All participants highlighted the need for timely support by the student. A two-day response time was the typical timeframe that the participants expected from their instructors. As a result, online universities may want to implement a timeline similar to the two-day turnaround that these participants desire.

Tying in to the need for a two-day response time from their instructor, participants also discussed the importance of receiving answers to their questions that provided them with clarity on the topic. If their professors were unable to give them the exact answer to their question, the participants wanted to be directed to a resource that was also clear.

Participants also benefited from the establishment of clear and consistent expectations from their instructors. Participants that did not receive clear expectations exhibited lower levels of satisfaction, whereas participants that were given clear expectations completed coursework more easily and experienced higher levels of satisfaction with the course.

The course design and setup play an integral role in supporting students because it allows the ability to access course learning activities, discuss topics on discussion forums, share resources, and access and submit course assignments. These factors were responsible for increased levels of student satisfaction when present.

This study also highlighted the importance of the professor's involvement and interest with his/her students. In every instance, participants expressed higher levels of overall satisfaction when they felt that their professors were genuinely interested in their success and when their professors took time to provide students with timely and adequate feedback.

Strengths, Weaknesses, and Limitations of the Study

The format of the study provided the researcher with a few advantages. One strength of the study included the use of interviews led by open-ended questions that allowed the researcher to obtain data on candid emotions from the participants as they recounted their individual experiences from their education. The interview methodology allowed for the researcher to tailor and adapt his questions when participants discussed issues and topics that required further clarification. The interview methodology also allowed the progression in the interviews from one topic to the next to be consistent from one participant to the next. This made it easier for the researcher to compare the different experiences of the participants.

The study included a few weaknesses. The first weakness included the inability to generalize the results because of the number of participants. Although common codes and themes arose throughout the interviews of each participant, five participants were not enough to develop a generalizable theory. The next weakness was that participants that had attended different courses and programs at different face-to-face institutions. This also attributed to the lack of generalizability of the study. Finally, participants had attended different courses and/or programs at Athabasca University, which did not allow the researcher to observe similarities and differences of the participant experiences within the same course.

One limitation of the study is that it did not allow for direct observation of participants during the process of attaining support. As a result, the study focuses only on the experiences from the point of view of its participants instead of directly and objectively observing the experiences of the participants as they happened.

Another limitation of the study is that it relied on the participants' depth of experience in both educational delivery methods and their ability to express their memories to the interviewer.

Not only was the researcher not present during the student support experiences, but also the participant bares the entire responsibility of being able to adequately communicate his/her experience.

Implications for Professional Practice or Decision-making

This study contributes to research at the root of education delivery and support by exploring and comparing the characteristics and delivery-specific implications of faculty-student support. It has explored and compared the experiences of a group of undergraduate students with faculty support and their level of satisfaction with the faculty support provided. The participants' methods and choices when seeking and receiving faculty support were analyzed, and from this analysis, the following recommendations for distance education support practices were derived. Online universities must ensure:

- students are provided with clear expectations of the course requirements;

- assignment instructions and objectives are clearly explained;

- students are provided with the opportunity to communicate amongst their peers in a well organized and collaborative discussion forum to support one another;

- students are provided with questions and answers from past courses so that they may progress at their own pace;

- the faculty and the administration deliver timely and adequate service to the students;

- professors demonstrate an interest in the success of their students by contacting them on a regular basis; and,

- professors provide and adhere to expectations for support that they have established with their students.

Implications for a Scholarly Understanding of the Field

The findings of the study have several implications within the context of Moore's theory of Transactional Distance. The various experiences and reactions observed by the students all implicate the effects of student behavior and attitude when they feel a high level of cognitive space between them and their instructors: transactional distance.

When participants experienced low levels of support from the faculty, the administration or their peers they exhibited high levels of transactional distance. This transactional distance increased the probability of those participants not completing their online courses or looking outside of the university for support. For example, P2 experienced a high level of isolation when both the faculty and her peers did not respond to her questions about the course. As a result she withdrew from the course. Although she received responses from her professor, P5 also experienced high level of transactional distance when her professor did not provide her with adequate guidance or support. As a result she hired an external tutor to help her pass the course. She admitted that if it were not for her busy schedule, she would attend a face-to-face university to complete her studies.

P3 and P4 both experience low levels of transactional distance during their experiences at Athabasca University. These low levels of transactional distance were a result of receiving timely support form their instructors, as well as having access to discussion forums that enabled them to receive support from their peers on issues. P3 and P4 both disclosed that often when they asked questions to their respective professors, they received a response within twenty-four hours.

Implications for Theory Building

Jacklin & Le Riche (2009) discuss the idea of including students in the responsibility of providing support to other fellow students to meet the increased demand and complexity. The

importance for timely support demonstrated by the participants in the study can be further enhanced by placing an increased emphasis on the use of current discussion forums in online universities and by also making this type of functionality available to face-to-face universities. Two of the participants were able to complete the course work at Athabasca University with minimal need to contact their respective instructors because the design of the course enabled them to follow the trail of questions and answers that their predecessors had left behind. Nichols (2010) noted that distance learners are themselves more independent therefore these asynchronous discussion forums allowed the two participants to complete their work independently while seeking and receiving immediate help only when needed.

Implications for Future Research Studies

Several participants in the study highlighted their approval of proactive measures put in place by their professors that increased their feeling of affiliation to the university. P1 enjoyed the attention and outreach that her professors provided to her during her online experiences at both Athabasca University and University 2. It would be interesting to see if an increase in outreach and proactive support by the faculty to the students would increase student satisfaction by decreasing student feelings of isolation and increasing student feelings of affiliation to an online university. The faculty has shown an important role in increasing student motivation by merely being present in this study. Perhaps further effort and involvement of the faculty may increase the online experience for students and maybe mitigate areas of ambiguity and confusion of online courses. This involvement could take place on the discussion forums as P3 and P4 both highlighted the importance that these areas played on increasing their level of satisfaction related to support.

Recommendations for Further Research or for Changing Research Methodology

An interesting concept for increasing the validity and reliability of the methodology may be to interview participants that are attending the same course, however in this instance one would choose an institution that offers the same course concurrently in class and online to directly compare the different experiences the participants encountered. This would allow the researcher to observe the participants during the period in which they attend the same course, and to observe the experiences and emotions that the participants feel throughout the entire duration of the course. It would also allow the research to observe the support choices that students make based on the delivery method independent of the course subject.

Recommendations for Change in Academic Concepts, Knowledge, or Professional Practice

The results of this study place an emphasis on the necessity and importance for the faculty and its associated practices to include a more learner-centered approach and an increase effort and commitment to student outreach and support. Timely adequate support was shown to pay dividends to participant levels of satisfaction in the study, and increase the likelihood that participants would choose to further their education in either educational delivery method.

In addition to an increased emphasis on faculty involvement, universities should focus on ensuring that their courses provide students with attractive and easy to use discussion forums that encourage students to participate in collaborative learning. This collaborative learning involves students helping other students with questions, or the open discussion of course topics to further their learning. This emphasis will help reduce student dependence on faculty support. However, the faculty should still be involved in moderating the discussion forum to ensure that the support provided by the students is accurate and on track.

Recommendations Concerning Changes in Organization, Procedures, Practices and Behavior

Universities should provide faculty with more time and resources to devote to the increase and improvement of support afforded to their students. Although the time allocation and workload of the faculty was not studied in the research, it would be fascinating to examine the other side of the faculty-student relationship in order to explore and compare the institutions' faculty commitment to supporting their students. Identifying the directives of the institutions aimed at supporting students may shed light on another aspect of measures that can be taken to improve student levels of satisfaction, which may in tern increase student enrolment and reduce student attrition.

Summary

This study has demonstrated that though participants were more satisfied with the support they receive from their face-to-face instructors, the flexibility of time and space that distance learning universities offer influences their decision to attend an online university instead. There are several factors the influence students level of satisfaction with regards to support, but the most important one discussed by the participants seemed to revolve around the faculty's desire to show interest in the learning outcomes of the students and their dedication to help them overcome any obstacles that may limit their ability to reach these desired learning outcomes.

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APPENDIX A

RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

<u>Interview Questions</u>

1. Which Canadian post-secondary institutions have you attended? How long did you attend the post-secondary institutions?

2. What area(s) of education did you study?

3. What methods of communication did you use to seek support from your instructor at the face-to-face post-secondary institution?

4. How would you describe your experience with these communication methods?

5. How did your methods of communication with your online instructor differ from your face-to-face instructor?

6. How would you describe your experience with these communication methods?

7. Describe your level of satisfaction as a student based on the methods of support afforded to you.

8. When comparing both methods of instruction, face-to-face and online, which method did you find supported you best as a student when you needed help? Why?

9. If you were to continue your education, what method of educational delivery would you pursue? Why?

10. Which skills and attributes do you value in an instructor?

APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT AIDS

Invitation to Participate in Research Project

October 2, 2013

Dear Mr./Ms.:

<u>SUBJECT</u>:   Student Experience Interview

Further to your voluntary acceptance for the above noted activity, I would like to invite you to participate in an interview to be held during the month of October or November 2013 at a time and location of your convenience.

You have been selected because you meet the following criteria:

You have studied in a face-to-face post-secondary institution and then studied via distance learning. For the face-to-face requirements, you have studied at a Canadian accredited post-secondary institution learning through lectures, group work and assignments. You have also attended post-secondary courses via distance learning through a Canadian online university. The distance learning was conducted using a learning management system and access to an instructor or a tutor via online communication methods.

The interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes and consist of questions regarding your academic experience in both of the above-mentioned institutions. Your name and personal information will not be disclosed to anyone other than myself.

Should you have any comments, questions or concerns, or have any physical or other limitations that require accommodation in conjunction with the above noted activity you may advise myself at adbedward@icloud.com or by telephone at 613-355-5583, my thesis supervisor Dr. Tom Jones at tomj@athabascau.ca.

This study has been reviewed by the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board. Should you have any comments or concerns regarding your treatment as a participant in this study, please contact the Office of Research Ethics at or 1-800-788-9041 ext. 6718 or by e-mail to rebsec@athabascau.ca.

Yours sincerely,

Antoine Despres-Bedward

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT

Consent for Participation in Interview Research

I volunteer to participate in a research project conducted by Antoine Despres-Bedward from Athabasca University. I understand that the project is designed to gather information about academic work of faculty on campus in order to fulfill the thesis requirement of his Master of Education. I will be one of approximately 6 people being interviewed for this research.

1. My participation in this project is voluntary. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty.

2. I understand that most interviewees will find the discussion interesting and thought-provoking. If, however, I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview. Furthermore, I understand that I can ask the interview to end without prejudicing my future involvement.

3. I understand that I can withdraw part or all of my data should I chose to end the interview session prematurely. However, I will not be able to withdraw my data after thirty days of the end of the interview.

4. Participation involves being interviewed by a student researcher from Athabasca University. The interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes. Notes will be written during the interview. An audio tape of the interview and subsequent dialogue will be made. If I don't want to be taped, I will not be able to participate in the study.

5. I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and that my anonymity as a participant in this study will remain secure. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions.

6. I understand that the researcher will do all of the qualitative analysis using a coding methodology, and will be only person who knows the identities of the participants.

7. I understand that the final thesis will be stored in the Athabasca University library and may be circulated broadly through the library (and possibly other sources, online and paper). It may also be the subject of future papers or presentations. Also that a thesis committee (including outsiders to AU) will examine it (all the thesis requirements of the Centre for Distance Education apply.)

8. Faculty and administrators from my campus will neither be present at the interview nor have access to raw notes or transcripts. This precaution will prevent my individual comments from having any negative repercussions.

    I understand that this study has been reviewed by the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board. Should I have any comments or concerns regarding my treatment as a participant in this study, I can contact the Office of Research Ethics at or 1-800-788-9041 ext. 6718 or by e-mail to rebsec@athabascau.ca.

9. I have read and understand the informed consent process. I have had all of my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

10. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

_____ _____

Participant Signature   Date

_____ _____

Investigator Signature   Date

APPENDIX D

ETHICS APPROVAL

Athabasca University

MEMORANDUM
Office of the Vice President Academic

Date: December 5, 2013

To: Antoine Despres-Bedward – AU M.Ed. Student

From: Alex Kondra, Acting Vice President Academic

Subject: Institutional Permission REB File #CDE 13-10

You have been approved to contact Athabasca University staff, students and systems for your research proposal "Comparing The Effect Of Support On Student Satisfaction In Online And Face-To-Face Universities" subject to the following conditions:

- Your research proposal has been approved by the Athabasca University Ethics Board (AUEB);
- Staff and student information is used solely for the purpose outlined in the research proposal submitted to the AUEB;
- Secondary uses of data or subsequent research proposal(s) will require additional approval of AUEB, permission of the staff or former staff, students or former students and institutional permission if the individual is still an Athabasca University staff or student;
- Staff and student participants will be provided with information about how information will be represented in documentation, reports and publications;
- Staff and student information will not be shared with a third party;
- The nature of communication with staff and students is that outlined in the research proposal submitted to the AUEB;
- Staff and students demographic information will be used solely within the research project;
- Documentation such as staff and student responses to questionnaires, interview responses (written or taped), observations of individual staff or student behaviors, etc. will not be used for any purpose other than that outlined in the research proposal submitted to AUEB;
- Staff and student information will be kept confidential until it is destroyed after a period not in excess of 10 years;
- Use of personal information will be in compliance with the **Freedom of Information, Protection of Privacy (FOIP)** legislation of the province of Alberta, Canada.

I wish you every success with your research project.

cc   Research Ethics Board
        Registrar
        Tom Jones – AU Supervisor – Centre for Distance Education

Memorandum

DATE: November 7, 2013

TO: Mr. Antoine Despres-Bedward

COPY: Dr. Tom Jones (Research Supervisor)
                    Alice Tieulié, Acting Secretary, Athabasca University Research Ethics Board
                    Dr. Vive Kumar, Chair, Athabasca University Research Ethics Board

FROM: Dr. Marguerite Koole, Chair, CDE Research Ethics Review Committee

SUBJECT: **Ethics Proposal #CDE-13-10: "*Comparing The Effect Of Support On Student Satisfaction In Online And Face-To-Face Universities*"**

The Centre for Distance Education (CDE) Research Ethics Review Committee, acting under authority of the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board to provide an expedited process of review for minimal risk student researcher projects, has reviewed the above-noted proposal and supporting documentation.

I am pleased to advise that this project has been awarded **APPROVAL TO PROCEED**. **Prior to starting the research, a revised application is to be submitted** showing the required changes and additional information requested below, **for file purposes only**. Please show all revisions by using ==yellow-highlighting== additions and ==~~yellow-highlighting with strikethrough~~== for deletions.

1. **Appendix 5 (Informed Consent Documents):**
   a. Recommend change in wording to point number 5: "I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and that **my information as a participant in this study will remain confidential**. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions."

AU Institutional Permission: Prior to recruitment, **for file purposes only**, provide a copy of **Athabasca University Institutional Permission**, issued from Vice-President Academic, enabling access to AU systems and student or staff contact for research purposes.

The AU Research Ethics office will assist in requesting the institutional permission from the Vice-President Academic by forwarding a copy of the final revised/approved ethics application, along with a request on behalf of the researcher.

Please forward the revised application to rebsec@athabascau.ca

This approval of your application will be reported to the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board (REB) at their next monthly meeting. The REB retains the right to request further information, or to revoke the approval, at any time.

The approval for the study "as presented" is valid for a period of one year from the date of this memo. If required, an extension must be sought in writing prior to the expiry of the existing approval. **A Final Report is to be submitted when the research project is completed.** The reporting form can be found online at http://www.athabascau.ca/research/ethics/ .

As implementation of the proposal progresses, if you need to make any significant changes or modifications, please forward this information immediately to the CDE Research Ethics Review Committee via rebsec@athabascau.ca for further review.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the Committee Chair (as above), or the AU

Research Ethics Administrator at rebsec@athabascau.ca .

Sincerely,

Dr. Marguerite Koole
Centre for Distance Education