




# Supporting Distance Learners with Disabilities

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- Because distance learning programs offer flexibility in location, scheduling, and course delivery formats, they can provide disabled students with what may be their last, best hope of access to education.

(Paist, 1995, p. 61)



# Presentation Overview

- Purpose of the Study
- Methodology
- Key Findings
  - Student Characteristics
  - Use of Support Services
  - Support Needed for Success
  - Self-Support at a Distance
- Future Research



# Problem

- Little research at the intersection of disability and distance education
  - Existing research focuses on functional aspects of teaching students with disabilities
- Non-participation in support services despite potential benefits (Moisey, 2004)



# Purpose of the Study

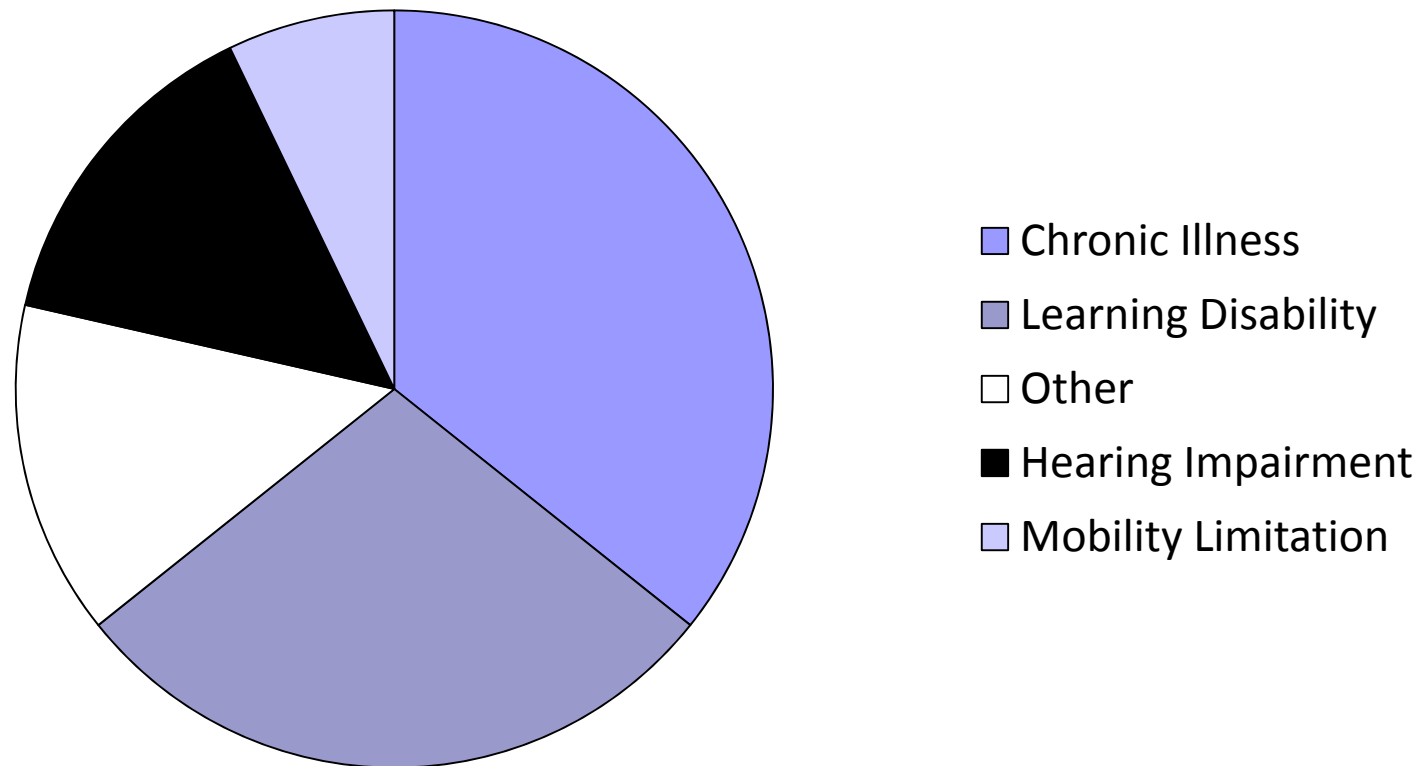
- Learn more about graduate students with disabilities studying at a distance
- Gain an understanding of their use of disability-specific support services
  - Previous/current support
  - Impact of support



# Methodology

- Key design issues of this case study:
  - Site – Graduate program offered exclusively at a distance
  - Participants – Both current students and graduates
  - Online Data Collection – Geographically disparate group

# Respondents' Disability Type



No one with a psychological disorder or visual impairment



# Demographics

- Predominantly female (71%)
- More than half (64%) older than 40 years
- Almost all (93%) employed full-time or part-time
- Many married or common law (78%)
- All residents of Canada
  - Students in the program are from at least 20 countries





# Impact:

## Unpredictability of the Condition

- “I could never predict when I might be too ill to work” (P1)
- “... I could be comfortably taking a course, then half-way through, have a relapse that might involve hospitalization” (P4)
- “Some days I cannot spell even simple words like ‘house’ and even after typing the word...it doesn’t look correct to me”



# Impact:

## Effect on Reading and Writing

- Might be the direct result of the disability type
  - Writing can be laborious and takes much longer to read chapters (P2)
  - Sometimes difficult to focus so read out loud (P6)
- Might be an indirect result
  - Challenge was to focus on the reading “rather than on how tired I was” (P3)



Impact:

## Physical Challenges

- Fatigue was a significant issue for three participants with a chronic illness
  - “the greatest difficulty I have to face with my MS...I get tired very quickly” (P4)
- One participant with a hearing impairment found that materials were often inaccessible



# Non-Participation in Formal Support Services

- **No one** used formal disability support services provided by the institution
- Four of the 14 respondents had disclosed the disability
- Five of the 14 had used formal support at previous institutions



# Reasons for Non-Participation

- Did not need assistance
- Sufficient sources of support elsewhere
- Did not want to disclose the disability
- Did not think it was fair
- Told no free accommodations
- Unaware of services
- Own coping mechanisms



# Essential Support for Success

## ■ Flexibility

- Setting own pace for learning
- Ability to manage studies with other commitments

## ■ Course Design and Delivery

- Text-based environment (barrier and benefit)
- Asynchronous
- Access to supporting materials



# Essential Support for Success

## ■ Interaction

- Lack of informal interaction is a barrier
- Text-based interaction well-suited for some learners

## ■ Instructor Awareness

- Flexibility important
- Negative attitudes can be detrimental



# Self-Support

- Coping Mechanisms and Study Strategies
  - Technology-based solutions are critical for some
  - Awareness of how disability impacts their studies
- Location Flexibility
  - Can be a critical factor in returning to school
  - Elimination of the need to go to class





# DE's Contribution to Self Support

## ■ Barriers

- Mediated communication
- Heavy reliance on text-based course material

## ■ Benefits

- Flexibility of studying at own pace
- Ability to choose where and when they studied
- Compensate for unpredictability of condition



# Resiliency

- Indirect impact of the condition can be a significant challenge
  - Past negative educational experiences
- Despite barriers, persisted and pursued graduate studies



# Future Research

- Expand to other programs at the same institution
- Investigate at a dual-mode institution
- Learn more about other disability types (i.e., psychological disorder, visual impairment)
- Study the relationship between previous use of support and participation during graduate studies
- Consider the use of other support services



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# References

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# Further Reading

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