Chapter 17
The Cost of Convenience: How Does Distance Education Mix with the Modern-Day Student?

Jessica Miles
Palm Beach State College, USA

ABSTRACT

Adult education tools have transformed over the years to become very Internet-based. Distance education courses represent one of the fastest-growing sectors within higher education and as an elected form of education for adult learners. Nontraditional students play an important role in the continued growth of this educational modality and are using distance education courses to further their knowledge, skills, and careers. Additionally, this tool is enabling adults who might otherwise be unable to participate in learning opportunities because they are place-bound to have access to a wealth of information and courses available through distance education courses. In regards to adult health, research has identified potential impacts on academic success including sleep quality and external responsibilities, such as work and caretaking. Nontraditional, adult students are increasingly pressured with greater external responsibilities that in turn may affect their sleep quality, creating a sort of chain reaction of potential academic obstacles. Raising awareness of these health issues and impacts is important in setting up adult learners, especially those taking distance education courses, with the greatest opportunities for academic success. This chapter explores distance education.

INTRODUCTION

In our evolving society, many adults are pursuing lifelong learning via the utilization of distance education courses, particularly at local community colleges that offer courses at more reasonable prices as compared to many larger universities. This trend has led to a rapidly growing number of distance education offerings and sections at the community/state college level. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that for the 2006-2007 academic year, 96 percent of public community colleges offered at least one distance education course (Parsad & Lewis, 2008). Also, institutions classified by the Carnegie Foundation as Associate’s Colleges showed the greatest increases in distance education enrollments from 800,000 students as of fall 2002 to
just over 1.9 million students in fall 2006 (Allen & Seaman, 2007). Surprisingly, distance education course enrollment at the community college level for fall 2006 accounted for higher figures than all other types of institutions, such as 4-year universities, combined (Cejda, 2010). Lokken and Womer (2007) report that online programs are the leading source of enrollment growth in community colleges because increases in that single sector exceed overall enrollment growth.

With this kind of growth, it remains prudent to examine distance education and its role in academic success for the now millions of students, including many nontraditional students, that take these types of courses. Furthermore, it is important to identify specific characteristics that have been linked with academic success or nonsuccess, to better prepare and/or educate students, faculty, and institutions involved in distance education. For example, covered in detail in this chapter will be the aspect of sleep quality and its impact, either positive or negative, on academic success. Understanding the adult health issues related to declining sleep quality, trends in this area, academic impacts, and its relationship with distance education courses are also covered.

Sleep quality is an important human health issue that is currently under increasing pressure. Students see distance education programs as opportunities to “pursue education necessary to their future while simultaneously maintaining or seeking employment” (Betts, Hartman, & Oxholm, 2009, p. 4). This is true for Traditionalists (1927-1945) and Baby Boomers (1946-1964), who are not in a position to retire, as a result of the downward economic shift, but who seek out distance education opportunities because it offers them a chance to earn additional work skills and degrees while simultaneously maintaining employment or when initiating a new career path (Betts et al., 2009). These situations, however, present the potential for increasing pressures on the individual student, as they attempt to balance educational demands with existing responsibilities. That pressure can result in reduced sleep quality.

The topic of distance education and the relationship of academic success to human health characteristics and cultural trends could not be more current and crucial, as the field continues to expand and the numbers of participating students grows. As such, the following subject matter will be covered in this chapter: a theoretical framework for research topics covered, a description of what distance education constitutes and its historical development to its present state, an explanation of the distance education student population and reasons why they have chosen distance education courses, a description of models ascribing for the high distance education course dropout rates, a report on ways to measure academic success, followed by a review of research related to sleep, sleep quality, work, caretaking responsibilities, and age and their relationship to academic success, specifically for adult learners. This collection of topics is meant to provide an understanding of how life events, responsibilities, and behaviors may facilitate or inhibit learning in the online environment. Furthermore, this chapter aims to instigate discussions on the health related issues impacting learning success and how those issues can be remediated to improve educational outcomes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the literature there is evidence of a variety of factors impacting adult learners’ academic success. The theoretical framework for this chapter is presented in Figure 1, highlighting the relationship between demographic factors, “external factors” (namely hours of employment, work status, and caretaker responsibilities of either children or the elderly) on sleep quality and academic success. The impacts, both positive and negative, will be covered in this chapter.