

HEAD OF THE VIRTUAL CLASS

Athabasca University way out front in distance learning

BY AMBER BOWERMAN

Debbie Jabbour hasn't attended a single lecture in her three years as a psychology student. In fact, she hasn't gone to a class, lecture or lab.

When she sits down to study for an upcoming exam or to polish off her latest term paper, she's more than 150 kilometres away from campus. She studies in a bright, albeit disorderly room, working on one of three computers and taking the occasional break to watch the news on a small black and white TV. There are papers and books scattered all over the place and the walls are adorned with photos, paintings and sketches of her four daughters.

From here, Jabbour submits assignments via e-mail at any time of the day or night, takes on-line practice tests to gauge her progress, and even works on group projects with students in other cities, some of whom she's never met. Jabbour is completing her degree through distance education at Athabasca University.

"Where I'm at right now in life, I have to work, I have a family and I have so many responsibilities that, realistically, I couldn't attend full-time university in a classroom situation," says Jabbour from her home in Edmonton. "Athabasca University just seemed ideal."

Having delivered distance education for the last three decades, Athabasca University (AU) seeks to eliminate traditional barriers to post-secondary education. Regardless of a student's location, employment status, familial commitments and even previous education, "Canada's Open University" is, well, wide open.

Canadian students need not have their high-school



matriculation in order to be eligible for AU's undergraduate programs, though most of the university's students have already studied at a post-secondary level by the time they enroll in distance learning. Registrations are accepted year-round, meaning students can start courses or programs at any time, rather than waiting for fall, winter or spring intakes. Though students and instructors rarely meet face-to-face, the one-on-one contact sorely lacking in traditional university classrooms is fostered and encouraged: students can reach their tutors by phone, fax, e-mail and, some-

times, video conference.

Most importantly, at least to the students, AU allows its pupils to learn at their own pace, freeing them from the demands of class schedules and, as Jabbour puts it, "giving students control over their own education."

High enrolment numbers attest to the success of the formula. Just six years ago, there were 11,000 students learning through AU's innovative delivery methods; today there are approximately 26,000. That growth is even more astonishing when you consider AU almost didn't make it out of the planning stages.

In the late 1960s, Alberta's universities saw such a significant upswing in student enrolment that the Social Credit government decreed a fourth campus-based university would open in St. Albert to serve students in the northern part of the province. They called it Athabasca University.

But by 1971, the enrolment trend of the sixties had stagnated. The newly elected Conservatives halted

development of the institute. "They decided at that time that there wasn't the need for another residential university and that Athabasca would basically be still-born," says AU's president, Dr. Dominique Abrioux.

Fortunately, the university had already appointed a president and a board of directors, none of whom were ready to give up on Athabasca. They decided that if the need for a campus-based university didn't exist, they'd find another niche to fill.

Their persistence paid off in 1972 when the government agreed to establish Athabasca University as a three-year distance learning pilot project to study new teaching methods for post-secondary students. The idea was to enable Alberta's learners to pursue their education without leaving their jobs, relocating or compromising commitments to their families. The result was 650 students in the first three years alone, studying through correspondence via telephone, fax and mail.

"It was innovative," says Abrioux, who originally joined the faculty as head of the French Language program in 1978. "But it wasn't nearly as innovative as the way we've ended up."

The pilot project was deemed a success and AU gained official university status in 1975, becoming the country's first distance university. The physical campus relocated to Athabasca, Alberta (the name was coincidental), in 1984, and has been operating there ever since. AU students, in the meantime, continue to operate from sundry locations as close as Edmonton and Calgary and as distant as Europe and Asia.

Less than half (45 per cent) of AU's 26,000 current students reside in Alberta. Another 45 per cent are scattered across Canada, while international students in 69 different countries account for 10 per cent of enrolment. Their courses are delivered through audio and video, mailed correspondence and, increasingly, the Internet.

"The availability of the Internet 24 hours a day is so helpful," says Jabbour, who uses cyberspace not only to prepare and submit work, but also to fulfill her duties as AU's student union president. "When you make the decision to go back to school and you've got (other) responsibilities, you're kind of sacrificing time everywhere," she says. "If I wasn't able to do this on-line and submit assignments in the middle of the night and by e-mail rather than having to go and attend classes, the

impact on my life and my family would be much greater."

AU has always appealed to students like Jabbour. The student body population is predominantly female and over the age of 25. But, Abrioux says, younger students, many coming straight from high-school, where computer literacy is becoming more of a priority, are recognizing the value of distance learning in fulfilling their educational goals.

"Younger students graduating from high school have very different expectations than they did 10 years ago," says Abrioux, whose own education at the University of Saskatchewan and the University of Alberta was "very traditional" in delivery. "They've developed the skills to be more independent and exploratory and they want to pursue their education in that way. They are going to want something very different."

Though Abrioux doesn't believe traditional classroom learning will ever be eliminated—nor does he think it should—he does believe providers of post-secondary education will need to marry traditional classroom instruction with more independent learning, likely on-line. "I think there is a convergence occurring," he says, "and it's going to accelerate." By every indication, it already is.

In September 2000, an alliance of six Canadian universities, led by AU and its president, Abrioux, pooled their correspondence and on-line courses

to create the Canadian Virtual University (CVU). Executive director Vicky Busch describes the CVU as "a portal that is aimed at making it easier for learners to find on-line and distance education opportunities."

The CVU does not grant degrees or charge tuition. It simply offers a one-stop shop on-line at www.cvu-uvc.ca to assist Canadians who are in the market for distance learning providers. "What we're providing is a single place where students can get information from different universities," explains Busch, "rather than going to each individual university's web site and searching them for information one by one."

Today there are 13 universities under the CVU umbrella, offering a combination of more than 2,000 individual courses and 120 complete programs. Students can enroll in a single course or a full program, take courses from any combination of the 13 universities, or fast track their on-campus studies by enrolling

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Athabasca University

in extra courses at schools like AU.

Because students don't actually enroll in the CVU itself, but in "home institutions," it's difficult to gauge the number of Canadians using the service. Estimates from the first year of CVU's operation, however, indicate that as many as 100,000 students have been linked with distance learning providers through the CVU web site. That number, says Busch, will grow as students' needs change and more universities adopt on-line learning.

She cautions educational institutions to keep their core mandates in mind, however. "For schools like Athabasca University, [distance learning] is their core business. It makes sense for them to build on what they've already developed," she says. "Other universities, whose primary business is to deliver post-secondary education in a campus setting to 18- to 22-year-olds, I don't know whether they should be pushed by the bandwagon phenomenon to start developing everything on-line. That isn't their core business."

Whether they're being pushed by internal pressures or by student demand, other universities, colleges and technical institutes are starting to include at least some elements of on-line instruction.

"Our primary focus is our on-campus population," says Susan Stein, e-learning project leader at the University of Alberta. "We do have a small amount of fully distance-based courses and a couple of distance programs but, for the most part, what we offer is an enhancement to the face-to-face classroom."

That enhancement comes courtesy of WebCT, the innovative learning management software behind U of A's 1,500 on-line courses and courses with on-line components. In June 2001, California-based Sun

Microsystems, a multibillion dollar computer company, recognized the U of A for its leadership in on-line instruction, dubbing the institute a "centre of e-learning excellence."

Stein says the system is so successful because it allows professors to have as many or as few on-line components as they are comfortable with. Some simply develop straightforward course Web pages with contact information, outlines and assignment criteria, while others use the resource to develop comprehensive cyber-classrooms complete with grouped discussions, virtual lectures and a study note delivery system.

"More and more professors are finding this a really good way to engage students, to make more material available to them and to not have to photocopy and hand out pages of course material," says Stein. "And the students seem to really like it. In fact, they advocate for it."

At the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT) in Calgary, 200 courses, 25 certificates and 18 diplomas are now offered through distance education. Blended delivery options present a choice of learning methods, including on-line and Web-based training, correspondence studies and classroom instruction that is enhanced by networked learning.

Meanwhile, SAIT's e-learning program, launched in 1997, which equips full-time on-campus students with laptop computers and access to on-line materials, has gone from connecting 30 learners to serving some 1,500 students in 10 different programs today. Gord Nixon, SAIT's vice-president, academic, predicts that literacy in information and communication technology will, in the near future, be "as common as basic reading, writing and arithmetic skills are today."

Nixon sees the technology SAIT is employing in the classroom and in cyberspace as a necessary enhancement to higher education, not a replacement for face-to-face instruction or hands-on training. "In the future, colleges will need to find the balance between the use of technology and traditional education to meet their market niche and learners' needs," he says.

"Technology will improve the quality of learning by facilitating active learning rather than the passive learning provided by traditional instructors. As the next generation enters post-secondary education, their expectations for the use of technology in the learning environment will drive all colleges to move in this direction."

But Alan Davis, academic vice-president at AU, cautions that too much competition among e-learning providers will result in a cancelling out of institutions with duplicate programs. "The trick will be to ensure that [institutes] don't compete unnecessarily," he says. "There is no use in everyone developing introductory psychology on-line when there are already plenty of choices for such a course."

CVU's Vicky Busch agrees: "We no longer need to

have the same programs offered in every city across the country, because the access issue isn't there any more. You really only need one of each program."

With 30 years behind it, AU may just have the distance learning market in Canada cornered. Abrioux welcomes the competition, saying that when traditional universities adopt on-line learning, Athabasca University, with its solid reputation and years of experience, actually benefits.

"We are the pioneers of on-line learning in Canada," he says emphatically. "Quite often people say to me 'Aren't you worried about all the new institutes that are getting into on-line learning?' I say 'no.' It gives us greater credibility because it's easier for us to do it better and less expensively than to start from scratch and build a reputation.

"The first 25 years of AU were about justifying what we do. And now, that's not an issue. We no longer have to justify it. We just have to do it better than everyone else." □

Amber Bowerman studied journalism at SAIT and is the editorial assistant at *AlbertaViews*.



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