



# Challenges in the graduate student experience: Struggling to complete valuable research in an online environment

Canadian Institute of Distance Education Research (CIDER)

May 1, 2013

# Researchers



- Matthew Asser, MEd
- Marti Cleveland-Innes, PhD
- Barbie Bruce, BEd
- Alicia Romero, BMus

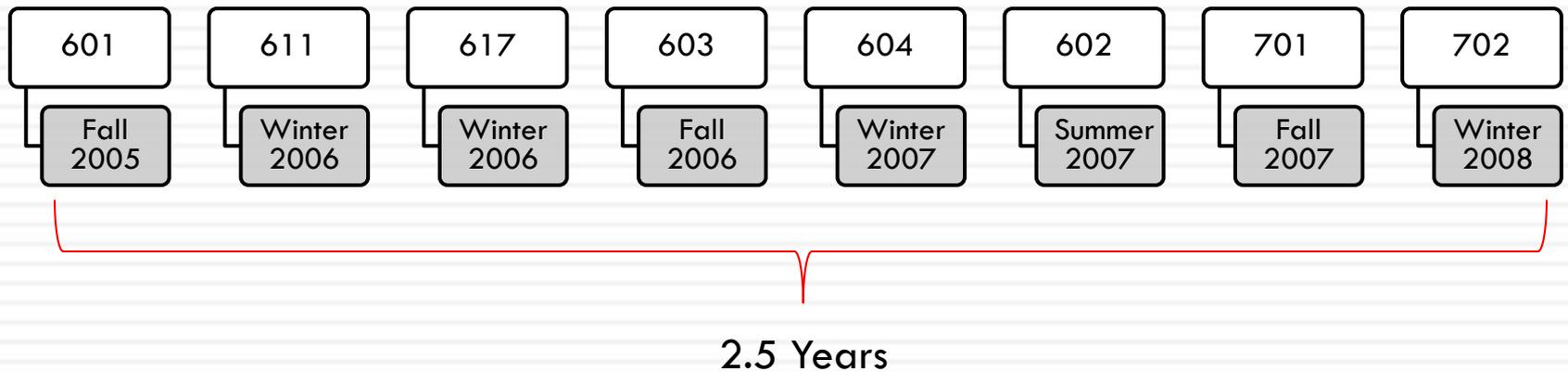
# Outline



1. Background
2. Research Question
3. Approach
4. Preliminary Findings
5. Next Steps—Phase 2
  - I. Refine our research question
  - II. Review and redefine our methodology
  - III. Review research and first draft

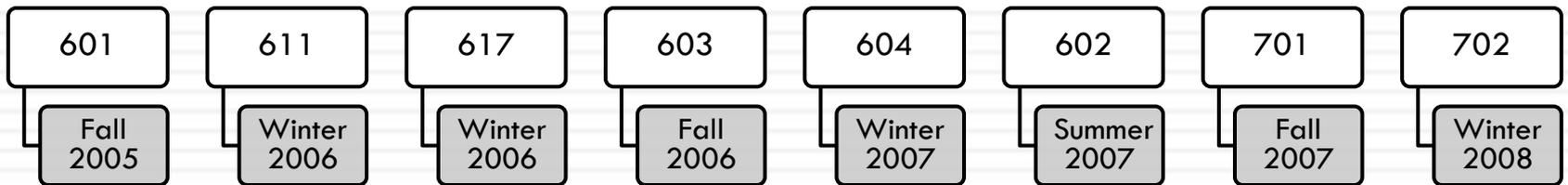
# Background

## Progress through the Master of Education (Distance Education) Program

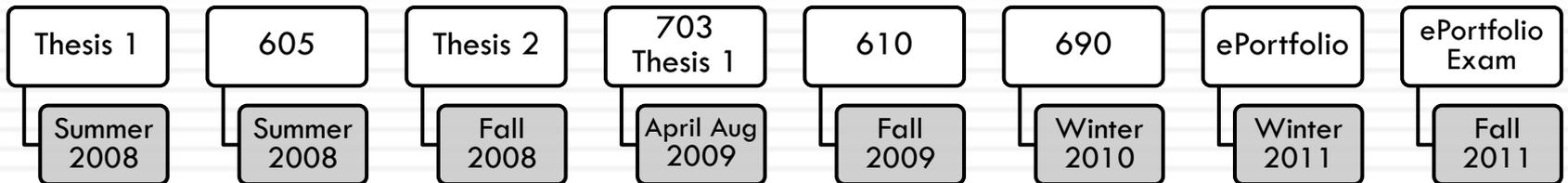


# Background

## Progress through the Master of Education (Distance Education) Program



2.5 Years



3.5 Years

# Additional Points of View

- **Barbie Bruce, BEd**
  - ▣ 3<sup>rd</sup> online program
  - ▣ Drawn to the research question due to her own research experiences in AU's MEd (DE) program
  - ▣ Found support for key areas of the thesis process
  - ▣ Support lacking in the area of sourcing sufficient research participants for her mixed-method study

# Additional Points of View

## ➤ Barbie Bruce, BEd

*“Information is lacking on how to find and maintain research participants in sufficient numbers to complete my mixed methods study. My hope is that our research study will provide useful information about online graduate students, their specific struggles and issues they encounter during the research component of their thesis.”*

# Additional Points of View

- Alicia Romero, BMus
  - ▣ Graduate student at Athabasca University in the MEd (DE) program
  - ▣ Completed two research thesis in face-to-face environments (BMus & Biomedical Eng.)

# Additional Points of View

## ➤ Alicia Romero, BMus

*“Students attending University can draw from a myriad of resources to complete their thesis. Informal ways include talking to classmates, librarians, and professors, observing others completing their thesis research, and in some places attending to a thesis defense.*

*Such means of acquiring knowledge and skills to complete a thesis may not be as accessible in online environments. This research has brought forward the need to further investigate how the thesis process takes place in online environments.”*

# Research Question

---

What issues do graduate students experience when conducting the research phase of their thesis?

- Distance Education (DE) Graduate level research is constrained
- Important research and research areas remain unexplored

# Research Question

## Major DE research categories (Sherry, 1995)

1. Redefining roles of key participants
2. Technology selection and adoption
3. Design issues
4. Strategies to increase interactivity and active learning
5. Learner characteristics
6. Learner support
7. Operational issues
8. Policy and management issues
9. Equity and accessibility
10. Cost/benefit trade-offs

# Approach

Meta-analysis of DE research from the selected DE journals.

Explore four main streams:

1. Context on how graduate studies emerged, value of graduate student research, and online graduate students' experiences.
2. Focus is thesis research students working online.
3. Access to research participants for distance education or campus graduate student researchers.
4. Access to research participants for distance education: different or same as campus.

# Approach

## Search terms:

- Problem\*, Distance, Education, Research
- Issue\*, Distance, Education, Research
- “graduates AND research AND Higher education and Distance education”
- Thesis, Dissertation, graduate student
- ERIC database

And

The screenshot shows the Google Scholar search interface. The search bar contains the text "Distance Education and thesis research". To the right of the search bar is a "Search" button and a link to "Advanced Scholar Search". Below the search bar, there are several filters: "Scholar" (selected), "Articles excluding patents" (dropdown), "since 1999" (dropdown), "include citations" (dropdown), and "Create email alert" (button). Below the filters, a message reads: "Your search - 'Distance Education and thesis research' - did not match any articles published since 1999."

# Approach

Working categories (refined throughout the process).

Order according frequency from three Journals' articles and other potentially useful research.

1. Scholarly skills
2. Mentorship
3. Role identity
4. Personal/social student support
5. Academic student support

# Approach

Categories	Journal Articles	Articles & Chapters	Total
Scholarly skills	5	13	18
Mentorship	4	7	11
Role identity	1	4	5
Personal/social student support	4	0	4
Academic student support	2	0	2

# Preliminary Findings

## Research and data

- Distance higher education research focus is predominantly either undergraduates students or the dissertation process.
- A few articles focus on graduate students' thesis writing process and supervisor relationship for campus programs.
- In distance education opportunities to develop a relationship with a faculty mentor is different.

# Preliminary Findings



## Research and data

- Research on and support for graduate student support for the research component of thesis is lacking.
- Positionality (1) & Mediated Communication (1)

# Next Steps

## 1. Refine our Research Question

- ▣ What are the issues masters' students encounter with the recruitment and retention of participants during the thesis research phase?

Or Possibly

- ▣ During the thesis research phase what are the issues masters' students encounter with the recruitment and retention of participants?

# Next Steps

## 2. Review and Redefine our Methodology

- U.S. Department of Education. (2010). *Evaluation of evidence-based practices in online learning: A meta-analysis and review of online learning studies.*

### Code book development

- Weston, C., Gandell, T., Beauchamp, J., McAlpine, L., Wiseman, C., & Beauchamp, C. (2001). *Analyzing interview data: The development and evolution of a coding system.*
- Garrison, D. R., Cleveland-Innes, M., Koole, M., & Kappelman, J. (2006). *Revisiting methodological issues in transcript analysis: Negotiated coding and reliability.*

# Next Steps

## 3. Review Research and First Draft

- ▣ Review the original research
- ▣ Determine new articles for inclusion
- ▣ First draft of our findings/article
  - Graduate students and why they are important
  - Distance education and the online process
  - Faculty advisor and thesis supervisor role

# Selected References

- Garrison, D. R., Cleveland-Innes, M., Koole, M., & Kappelman, J. (2006). Revisiting methodological issues in transcript analysis: Negotiated coding and reliability. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 9(1), 1-8.
- Sherry, L. (1995). Issues in distance learning. *International Journal of Educational Telecommunications*, 1(4), 337-365.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2010). *Evaluation of evidence-based practices in online learning: A meta-analysis and review of online learning studies*. Retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/tech/evidence-based-practices/finalreport.pdf>
- Weston, C., Gandell, T., Beauchamp, J., McAlpine, L., Wiseman, C., & Beauchamp, C. (2001). Analyzing interview data: The development and evolution of a coding system. *Qualitative Sociology*, 24(3), 381-400.