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Increasing the Success of Online Students

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By Ivan L. Harrell II

The introduction of the Internet has dramatically changed the process of information transmission as well as practically every other aspect of American society, including our higher education system. Many colleges and universities have taken advantage of the utility of the Internet and instituted online courses and online degree and certificate programs. Although this form of instruction has gained increasing acceptance as an effective tool for the delivery of instruction, the issue of student success in this environment has emerged as an area of concern.

Previous studies have shown that student success – in particular, retention rates – in many online courses is significantly lower than in similar traditional face-to-face courses (Carr, 2000; Royer, 2003; Shreck, 2002). This is especially an issue of importance for community college faculty and administrators because our institutions traditionally enroll greater numbers of nontraditional students and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds than do four-year institutions (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). In general, these types of students tend to display lower retention and success rates than traditional students enrolled at four-year institutions (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Although this issue is growing in importance, there has neither been a large body of research aimed at understanding why the problem exists nor a sharing of information on how to address the problem, particularly at the community-college level.

Nevertheless, there is information available that faculty and administrators can use to have a positive impact on the experience and success of students in the online environment. Previous research has identified five broad categories that can have a positive impact on online student success: student readiness, student orientation, student support, instructor preparation and support, and course structure. This article will address the first three of these factors.

Student Readiness

The first step to increasing online student success is for institutions to determine if potential online students are ready to participate in the online environment. There are a number of online readiness instruments and scales available for institutions to employ. Many of these readiness instruments evaluate a student's individual characteristics – such as learning style, locus of control, computer skills, and self-efficacy – to determine if an individual's characteristics are congruent to the skills and abilities needed to be successful in the online environment. For instance, a number of researchers have examined the impact of learning styles on community-college student retention in online courses (Diaz & Carnal, 1999; Doherty & Maddox, 2003; Schrum & Hong, 2002). These researchers concluded that students with certain learning styles may not be as successful in the online environment as those with other learning styles.

Use of readiness instruments has resulted in reports of increased retention in many online courses (Dupin-Bryant, 2004; Lorenzetti, 2005; Gaide, 2004). This is due in part to the ability of institutions to identify potential at-risk students and to use the information for proper advising. Institutions may consider the possibility of limiting enrollment to those who are not considered to be at-risk students and who have the characteristics that are needed to be successful in online courses. For example, some institutions require students to have earned a certain cumulative grade point average (GPA) before enrolling in online courses. Others limit enrollment to students who have successfully completed a certain number of face-to-face courses.

Although some students may be classified as at-risk in the online environment, taking an online course may be their only enrollment option. For instance, some students may not be able or have the desire to participate in traditional face-to-face on-campus course offerings. They may be students with severe physical disabilities or students with enormous family and work responsibilities. As a result, students who may be identified as at-risk may view enrollment in online courses as their only option to participate in post-secondary education. If this is the case, institutions should provide these students with resources that can support an increased likelihood for success.

Student Orientation

Whether or not a student is fully ready to participate in the online environment, all students who are attempting to enroll in online courses should be properly oriented to the environment. This can be achieved by institutions implementing orientation

programs that appropriately prepare students for online work. This method seems to be the most favored way to increase online retention (Bauman, 2002; Murray, 2001; Scagnoli, 2001, as cited in Gleason, 2004). Wojciechowski and Palmer (2005) also found that an online orientation was the second greatest factor, following a student's GPA, in predicting success in an online course.

Orientation should give students experiences that mimic online courses. Through orientation, students can determine if the online environment is the right fit for them even before enrolling in such courses. If students are not properly oriented to the online environment, they may enroll in an online course only to later determine that their expectations, learning style, and/or other personal characteristics are not congruent to the online environment; this can lead to frustration, decreased student success, and increased course withdrawal.

There are a number of factors that institutions should consider when developing an orientation to the online environment. The first is content. Each orientation should provide students with the opportunity to develop realistic expectations of the online environment. Nash (2005) found that students who failed or dropped out of the distance-learning environment were more likely than successful distance students to report that they believed the environment was going to be easier than the face-to-face environment. On the other hand, Herbert (2006) found that the students who were most successful in their online courses were those who had expectations that were consistent with their online experience.

The orientation should also educate students about the technical and computer skills needed to be successful in the online environment. If students do not have the appropriate level of computer skills when enrolling in these courses, they may spend a considerable amount of time attempting to develop those skills and less time on the course content. Obviously, this lack of skills could lead to decreased student success and increased withdrawal.

Additionally, online orientation should

- be interactive,
- introduce students to the type of assignments that they will be required to complete,
- allow for the development of technical and computer skills that will be needed to complete coursework,
- introduce institutional policies, procedures, and resources,
- assist students with developing appropriate time management and study skills, and
- help students to develop appropriate NetEtiquette.

The second factor an institution should consider when developing an orientation to the online environment is format, as delivery is possible in multiple formats.

Face-to-face orientations can be developed that allow students to meet with the faculty and other students in order to receive the orientation content. The face-to-face orientations have been found to enhance a sense of community among online students (Gaide, 2004). This is important because many students cite that they drop out of the online environment because of a sense of isolation (Pugliese, 1994; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; McCracken, 2004). The limitation of this is that students who are truly separated from the institution by considerable distances may also find it difficult to come to the institution to participate in an orientation.

Institutions may also choose to offer the orientation online. This is the most favored format because it reflects the environment that students will experience when they enroll in online courses. Some researchers have found that a completely online orientation is a critical element in online student success (Palloff & Pratt, 2003). If an institution does not have the ability or resources to develop an institution-wide online orientation program, faculty members of online courses should be encouraged to either develop an orientation that is specific to the requirements of their courses or spend the first part of the course orienting the students to the environment.

The third factor that an institution must consider is whether or not to require the completion of an orientation program by all students interested in enrolling in an online course. Some institutions require the completion of these programs for any student prior to enrollment in the first online course. Other institutions only require the orientation to be completed by students who have been identified as at-risk after the completion of an online-readiness tool, or only by those students who have previously or are currently taking an online course but have not been (or are not currently being) successful. Each institution must evaluate its student populations – as well as its institutional policies and procedures – to determine the feasibility of requiring the completion of an online orientation.

A number of researchers have found that these types of orientation programs have led to increased online student success. For instance, Cosumnes River College offers an orientation program entitled Online Student Success (OSS) during the middle of the semester that is intended to assist future online students as well as current online students who are experiencing difficulty in the online environment. The program prepares students to succeed in the online environment by exposing them to the course-management system and teaching them the

challenges of online learning, among other things (Beyrer, 2006). Students who successfully completed OSS were reported to have had higher online success rates than students who did not take the course. Also, students who took online courses before and after they completed OSS had higher rates of student success in the courses that were completed after the completion of OSS. Beyrer (2006) wrote that many students indicated that OSS assisted them in succeeding in future online courses and increased their comfort with the online environment.

Other studies confirm the value of orientation. Bauman (2002) wrote that after offering a required, week-long online orientation “bootcamp,” students reported increased confidence levels, decreased experience with technical problems, and better preparation to take their first online course. The course also allowed faculty to focus more on course content, instead of spending class time educating students on how to properly navigate the online environment. In addition, Lynch (2001) reported that a required orientation course for an online bachelor’s degree program made a significant difference in student success and reenrollment in online courses.

Student Support

It is also imperative that students are provided with adequate support structures to assist them as they complete their online courses. Lack of proper support for online students can result in decreased student success and increased withdrawals. There are multiple ways that institutions can support online students.

Providing adequate technical support is critical. In many instances, the online environment is new for students, which means that they not only have to give attention to course content but also to the technology that is being used to complete coursework. This technology is inclusive of course-management systems, synchronous and asynchronous communicative software, email, and text messaging. During the semester, students may experience difficulty with using these tools, even if they have been properly trained. In many instances the online environment allows students the opportunity to complete coursework any time and any place, so adequate technical support should be available to students at all times. A lack of adequate support could lead to late submission of coursework, frustration, and dissatisfaction with the online environment.

Although many institutions offer live technical support during normal business hours, issues for students typically arise after normal business hours when they are completing course assignments. Providing any-time, any-place technical support can be achieved by employing professional or student workers who use chat technology to address technical support issues from any location. In addition,

institutions can provide students with a CD that includes all needed software applications and accompanying installation and instructions – prior to their enrollment in online courses. Also, institutions may make frequently asked questions and answers about common technical support questions available online. Whatever option an institution is able to offer, it must ensure that students are aware of how to access technical support prior to enrolling in an online course.

Online students should also be given the opportunity to develop a sense of community. Researchers have found that many students withdraw from the online environment because they feel a sense of isolation (Pugliese, 1994; Ludwig-Harman & Dunlap, 2003; McCracken, 2004). The more students integrate into the formal and informal social and academic culture of the institution, the more successful they will be (Tinto, 1975); this theory is relevant to online students.

Institutions can encourage the development of an online community by providing online opportunities for students to become involved in student government forums, learning communities, and study groups. The University of Phoenix encourages group study by the use of a computer conferencing system that allows students to interact with each other. Instant messenger and blogs can be used to encourage formal and informal dialogue between students who may or may not be enrolled in the same courses; a virtual “lounge” can give students the ability to converse about varying topics and build relationships. Nicholson (2002) reported that the use of instant messaging by online students allowed for easier communication, a stronger sense of community, and more chances to involve themselves in communication related to class material and the institution. Farmer (2006) wrote that the benefits of the use of instant messenger by online students included a heightened social presence and a potential for growth in collaborative opportunities.

Mentoring programs have also grown as a viable support mechanism for online students. These programs give online students the opportunity to interact with mentors who guide them through their online experience. Mentors can serve as teaching assistants, social-connectedness initiators, and technical supporters (Chang, 2002). Professional staff or previously successful online students can serve as mentors. The mentor might function as a single point of contact for online students to assist with enrollment transactions or technical difficulties, as well as to encourage participation in community-building activities. These programs can be structured to provide assistance to students during the first two weeks of the semester or for the duration of an individual class, certificate, or degree program. Institutions may also consider requiring participation of at-risk online students in such a program.

Some institutions have begun to implement online mentoring programs. For example, each student who enrolls in an online Technology in Education Master's Degree Program at Leslie University is assigned an advisor who assists the student from their initial inquiry about the program through the last stages of graduation. This gives the student a central point of contact. The mentor also serves as a liaison between the student and the faculty, assisting the student if academic-related problems arise (Yoder, 2005). The California Virtual Campus, as part of The Rio Hondo Virtual College Retention Project, employs online counselors who are responsible for

- contacting students who have not logged onto the course website by the end of the first week,
- contacting students who have not begun coursework by the fifth week of class, and
- providing continuous follow-up with students in response to faculty referral or by student requests (Torres-Gil, Maffris, Garcia, & Roig, 2000).

Both of the institutions report success in the implementation of their online mentoring programs.

Accepting the Responsibility

Success of online students has become an issue for many institutions offering online courses, degree, and certificate programs. Although it may be an intimidating task, institutions must meet the challenge to increase online student success. Each institution must evaluate its online environment, the needs of online students, and the institutional resources necessary to develop an individual plan that uses these three categories to increase the success of their online students.

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