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INCREASING SUCCESS WITH ONLINE DEGREE COURSES AND PROGRAMS IN THE VCCS

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last three years, 724,116 online courses were attempted within the Virginia Community College System (VCCS). From these attempts, 206,533 resulted in a grade of D or F or a withdrawal, accounting for 29% of all attempted online courses (Virginia Community College System, 2015). This does not account for the students who may have dropped the course early in the semester to avoid academic and/or financial consequences. Studies have shown that students who do not experience success in their courses drop out significantly more than their counterparts (Thayer, 1973). Additionally, these students experience delayed degree or certificate completions, higher program costs and student debt. It is for these reasons, that we must explore ways to increase student success in online courses and programs. By addressing accessibility to and student readiness for online education as well as applying best practices for distance learning, the VCCS can positively impact student success with online degree courses and programs.

Table 1 <i>Grade Distributions for Attempted VCCS Distance Learning Courses</i>							
		Earned grade of A-C		Earned grade of D or F		W grade - Withdrew	
	ALL	N	%	N	%	N	%
2015-16	249426	177588	71.2	45766	18.3	26072	10.5
2016-17	236068	168639	71.4	43280	18.3	24149	10.2
2017-18	238622	171356	71.8	42721	17.9	24545	10.3

IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Accessibility

The VCCS community currently includes eleven community colleges housed within rural areas. These campuses form a region commonly referred to as the Rural Virginia Horseshoe (VCCS, 2015). Within this region, which marks 75% of the state of Virginia, resides 2.1 million residents with “more than half a million people having less than a high school education” (VCCS, 2015). This region is also plagued with lower socioeconomic statuses and 30% of the population is dependent on government assistance in order to meet monthly expenses (VCCS, 2015). Additionally, research shows that fewer rural Americans are online: 39 percent of rural Americans lack home broadband access – in contrast to only 4 percent of urban Americans. And 69 percent of rural Americans use the internet, compared to 75 percent of urban residents (Sadowski, Stewart, & Pediaditis, 2018).

Self-regulated Learning and Student Readiness

Pursuing an online education requires a different skill set as compared to traditional face-to-face instruction. Online education requires that students exercise self-regulating learning including metacognition, strategic action, and self-motivation to learn (Cosnefroy, Fenouillet, Mazé, & Bonnefoy, 2018). Students who are unable to exercise self-regulated learning display behaviors such as procrastination and disorganization, both of which have shown to have a negative impact on academic performance (Cosnefroy, Fenouillet, Mazé, & Bonnefoy, 2018). Unfortunately, students do not always develop these skills prior to starting college. The structure of pre-college education can be described as teacher-controlled focusing only on content versus learning skills (Dignath-van Ewijk. & van der Werf, 2012). Additionally, industry experts suggest that students are rarely prepared for the responsibility of managing their own learning (Jaggars, S. S., Edgecombe, N., & Stacey, G. W., 2013). Therefore, the VCCS should not assume students are

starting their post-secondary education with the skills necessary to be successful in online courses. One area of opportunity for post-secondary institutions would be to implement policies and procedures that encourage online student readiness and the implementation and development of self-regulated learning behaviors.

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Accessibility

In just one community college within the Rural Horseshoe, 12% of the student population lacks reliable access to internet within their homes (see Appendix A). Although the challenge of increasing access to reliable internet and technology is not one that post-secondary schools can address directly or readily, there is an opportunity for the VCCS to implement policies and practices that support students living in rural areas successfully completing online degree courses and programs.

One recommendation is to encourage VCCS schools to develop partnerships with local businesses throughout rural areas to offer free access to Wi-Fi and study spaces so students have an opportunity to successfully complete their online education. An aspect of this would be conducting a needs assessment regarding accessibility needs among its student population.

This collaboration between VCCS schools and local businesses would be mutually beneficial. Local businesses would experience an increase in customer traffic, which can potentially translate into increased revenue. For VCCS, students living in rural areas as well as those who may not have the means to purchase internet service, will have a known access point to successfully complete their online degree course and programs. This will likely contribute to higher success rates for students taking online courses.

An example of how such a partnership could work was demonstrated in a New York school district looking to increase access for its students in rural areas. This school district partnered with a company to provide SmartSpot® devices (Wi-Fi hotspots) in order for students to access safe, CIPA-compliant Internet at home. According to the superintendent, academic achievement increased, discipline problems decreased, attendance improved, and graduation rates went up (Kajeet).

Although providing Wi-Fi hotspots may not be cost effective for the VCCS, it provides an example of how partnering with community agencies and working collaboratively can potentially increase student success in online degree courses and programs.

Self-regulated Learning and Student Readiness

Current research supports the use of an online orientation to help prepare online students for the unique challenges they will soon encounter in their selected modality (Jones, 2013). One current example of this, within the VCCS system, is an orientation program implemented by J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College (Reynolds) that includes student readiness tool to help students, advisors, and faculty access individual students' levels of preparation for distance learning. Reynolds has reported high success rates for students who have completed this online orientation. Although this was a program contracted through a third-party organization, the premise of their orientation would support our recommendation for an online orientation for all students prior to their attempt of an online course. This orientation program should address specific topics necessary for online student success, such as ensuring reliable access to internet from multiple entry points and certain behaviors necessary for success in online courses (i.e. self-regulated learning). Our recommendation also emphasizes that this orientation should be

required before any online courses are attempted, versus during the first semester of the student's degree or certificate program. This would address student challenges with navigating unfamiliar online learning management systems and practicing self-regulated learning in a safe environment with little impact on student academic performance.

Addressing self-regulated learning behaviors in online students can also be accomplished through curriculum and course design. Certain aspects of the learning environment can intentionally be addressed that encourages the use of self-regulated behaviors. In a small focus group conducted for the purpose of this project, we learned of certain industry practices implemented by other successful online institutions that their students contributed to their academic success (see Appendix B). The participants' feedback inspired our recommendations for improving curriculum and course design through consistent due dates across ALL online course, setting proper expectations at the beginning of the semester of all assignment/exam/project due dates, and expectations that avoid excessive access to internet such as multiple due dates throughout the week or assignments that require prolonged internet access. Course design should consider the needs of our students. Students in rural areas are often students that must work while attending school in order to financially survive. Online education offers an appealing option that would allow them to do both, but it must be built around the unique challenges these students face, such as lower rates of internet access and restrictions on available time to access their online material.

CONCLUSION

The current rates of unsuccessful attempts of online courses has had significant impact on the VCCS. The number of unsuccessful attempts in online courses would account for an estimated

addition 10,327 associate degrees or 25,817 certificates conferred over the three-year period¹. Because of the severity of this issue, our recommendations address both student preparedness and accessibility, two factors we believe greatly contribute to the prevalence of unsuccessful attempts.

¹ Calculation is based on dividing the total number of unsuccessful attempted courses (206,533 including fails and withdraws) by an estimated 20 courses for an associates degree and an estimated 8 courses for a certificate program.

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APPENDIX A

Academic Performance Outcomes for a Sample VCCS Institution

The following is academic performance data for a VCCS institution that falls within the Rural Horseshoe. It includes student survey data reported each fall semester from 2014 through 2017. For the sake of anonymity, the institution will remain nameless. However, it was selected as reference to the current trends of internet access experienced in rural areas in the state of Virginia.

Table 2
Do you have access to the internet at home?

	Fall 2015		Fall 2015		Fall 2016		Fall 2017	
	% chosen	n	% chosen	n	% chosen	n	% chosen	n
Yes-high speed	83%	531	78%	342	79%	318	82%	414
Yes-dial up	6%	40	7%	29	9%	35	7%	33
No	11%	72	15%	67	12%	50	12%	61

APPENDIX B

Results from Focus Group Study

Research for this project included a small focus group conducted at one of the fourteen community colleges within the Rural Horseshoe. Our purpose for this focus group was to collect information regarding what our competitors in the online education industry are currently doing and what, from both an employee and student perspective, contributed towards academic success. For the sake of anonymity, the name of the institution where this study was conducted, the names of the individuals involved, and the names of the institutions referenced will remain anonymous.

Focus group: Success in the online classroom

Summarized results from 5 participants

Names of participants and institutions were removed for anonymity, Names of institutions were replaced with ***

Question #1: How would you identify? Are you a previous/current employee, or a previous/current student of an online institution, or both?

1. Both:
2. Both
3. Student
4. Student
5. Both: Employee

Question #2 - What learning management systems (LMS) did you encounter?

1. LMS designed and operated by ***
2. Blackboard
3. LMS designed and operated by ***
4. Blackboard
5. Blackboard and a LMS designed and operated by ***

Question #3 – Describe the structure of your online learning environment.

1. Online textbooks, 5 week courses taken 1 at a time for undergrad students and 6 week courses taken 1 at a time for grad students, no specific times to check in, due dates for assignments were always on Sunday each week at midnight, discussion questions with specific requirements of how many times to check in each week, you had to be in the online classroom at least three times each week but not on specific days.
2. Offered as both 15 week and 8 week courses, students were taking both ground and online courses that they selected, used paper textbooks, curriculums were individually designed by instructors but the orientation class was consistent, all sections looked and operated the same
3. The first course was the introduction course to help you figure out your foundation, each class started with a paper, weekly video sessions with the instructor to discuss assignments and expectations, these sessions were not mandatory and were recorded for those not able to attend at the time it was delivered, only one instructor had their session in the middle of the day the rest were after work and at a convenient time. Assignments were due on Monday, Wednesday, Friday and sometimes Sunday, but I did notice a pattern and it became second nature to me, instructors also had office hours

4. Classes were taken 2 at a time each eight weeks, we were required to purchase paper textbooks, due dates were consistent from class to class, we had discuss board with due dates and had to post a certain amount of times, the syllabus told us all of our assignments and due dates ahead of time
5. Took 1 class every 8 weeks, we had 1 assignment each week always due on Sunday by midnight and 2 discussion boards, one due on Saturday and one due Monday by midnight. We also had to respond to 3 other students on 3 separate days each week. Our textbooks and materials were built right into the classroom. The syllabus told us all assignments and due dates so we could plan ahead.

Question # 4: What resources were available to online students

1. Walk to class with your enrollment counselor before you started your first course (like an online orientation one on one, the counselor walked each student through the online learning environment to make sure they were comfortable on their first day). Tutoring, mentoring, online library, IT department that was open 24/7
2. Nothing specific to online students since our set up was both online and face to face courses and students had a mixture of each.
3. A tech package that was charged with tuition, included a macbook and all the software and hardware needed to complete the program. We had an orientation that you had to complete before starting your first course. It consisted of 16 modules that you completed through (the LMS) so you could prepare for future courses.
4. An online writing center, the school would send emails all the time and call all the time to check in on me and if I needed help, our first course was an orientation class, and I had to do a survey

early on regarding if online education was right for me. The results of the survey were reviewed by the instructor.

5. An IT department that was open 24/7, online writing center, instructor had office hours and was required to respond to emails and phone calls within 24 hours, online library and research assistants that you could chat with for help with research for writing assignments.

Question #5: What do you think contributed to online student success?

1. Onboarding into the class, at UOP they walked each student to class over the phone to review the classroom prior to their first day, and the fact that every single class was set up in the exact same format, everything was always in the same place so you knew where your discussion boards were, where assignments were, etc.
2. Instructors were very proactive in terms of follow up. It was such a small university that we knew our students individually and if they were missing assignments or misunderstanding things we could just reach out to them.
3. Expectations, such as assignments and due dates, were always pointed out in the beginning of the class and throughout class, the instructors always made sure to point out important reminders, we also did a lot of peer reviews on our work before submitting it.
4. Asking a lot of questions! I called whomever I needed to, I would ask questions of the instructor.
5. The repetition of due dates. I could always plan life around school because I knew that every Wednesday I had an assignment due. I would always study at the same time because I knew each week's requirements would be the same. It was easy to make school a priority because it was constant through to graduation. As an adult student, I had a lot of other roles (mom, employee, etc) that I could not control.

Question #6: What do you think made it challenging for online students?

1. *** didn't have classes students could take to get comfortable with technology prior to starting an online class.
2. The students would neglect to drill down (click on the assignment, and then click on the instructions, and then click on where you submit) so they would miss information. It seems like we could have posted each individual item, but it is so hard to present so much information to students in an online environment.
3. It was fast paced, so you really had to manage your time. It became challenging at times to get things done while being a full time employee and student. It was helpful that when you started a new class, they had all of the assignments available for you to look at. They had a syllabus but what was really beneficial was the "course at a glance" tool. It was a chart that had all of the assignments and due dates listed.
4. Not having the instructor in front of you. I feel like I would have learned more if I had the instructor in front of me.
5. Time management. As an online student and an adult learning, I had to juggle many responsibilities. I felt that the times I did not do well in class was when I did not take the time to plan ahead.