Completion Rates and Distance Learners

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INTRODUCTION

Critics of distance education frequently assert that completion rates are lower in distance education courses than in traditional courses. Such criticism comes despite sparse and inconclusive research on completion rates for distance and traditional education courses. This article reviews some of the existing research and then describes some of the caveats and complexities in comparing completion rates in traditional and distance education. Analysis reveals that numerous factors make comparison between these two formats difficult, if not impossible. Problems include limitations in the research design itself, differences in student demographics, and inconsistent methods of calculating and reporting completion. After exploring these issues, the article presents best practices for improving completion rates while emphasizing that distance education completion rates may be acceptable after considering distance learners' characteristics.

In recent years, many university and distance education administrators have expressed interest in and concern about completion rates for distance education courses and programs for a number of reasons. Debate also continues on whether and why courses for distance education students may lead to higher non-completion rates. If they really do have lower completion rates, some attribute the difference to the lack of faculty-student interaction, while others say it is impossible to compare the two groups because distance education students are inherently different from traditional students (e.g., older with additional commitments) (Carr, 2000).

This article provides a brief review of recent research on completion in distance education and exposes problems with the ongoing comparison between distance and traditional education completion rates. Problems include limitations in the research design itself, differences in student demographics, and inconsistent methods of calculating and reporting completion. These weaknesses suggest that educators may be metaphorically comparing distance education oranges to traditional education apples in ways that are invalid and unfair, especially whenever they also discredit distance education as a result. Our review and analysis of the literature indicates that not only is there little or no data extant on distance education completion rates, but what is available is suspect, since there is so much inconsistency in how the completion rates are calculated from courses to programs at institutions, and then from institutions in a region to those throughout the country.

Arguably the most important part of this article is the review of literature which identifies some best practices to help ensure that distance learners have every opportunity possible to successfully complete their courses. It is evident from these research findings that some distance education students should not be expected to complete courses because of their life circumstances. Additionally, if completion rates are used as a criterion for evaluating the effectiveness of courses and programs, they are best done by comparing apples to apples and oranges to oranges at the specific course and program level, especially in the absence of any generally accepted algorithm for calculating completion rates.

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RESEARCH FINDINGS ON COMPLETION RATES

Studies on distance education completion, especially those targeting online learning, are relatively few, due partly to the medium's relative newness. An article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2000 reported: "No national statistics exist yet about how many students complete distance programs or courses, but anecdotal evidence and studies by individual institutions suggest that course-completion and program-retention rates are generally lower in distance-education courses than in their face-to-face counterparts" (Brady, 2001, p. 352).

Researchers report variation in completion rates among institutions, "with some reporting course-completion rates of more than 80 percent and others finding that fewer than 50 percent of distance-education students finish their courses" (Carr, 2000, paragraph 10). In another study by Brigham (2003), 66% of distance-learning institutions have an 80% or better completion rate for their distance education courses, and 87% of institutions have 70% or better completion. Roach (2002) observed that "individual schools and organizations are reporting that their online programs have as high or higher rates of retention as their traditional classroom offerings" (p. 23).

While these studies reveal wide variance in completion rates, additional research focusing on the specific dynamics that influence completion and retention appear to be more consistent and helpful. Kemp (2002) cites studies by Kennedy and Powell (1976) and Brindley (1987) which state that "life circumstances combine with other factors (e.g., independence, organizational abilities, and social support) as predictors of persistence or withdrawal" (p. 65). Kemp also refers to a study by Powell, Conway, and Ross (1990) that reported: "Life circumstances interact with predisposing characteristics (e.g., educational preparation, socioeconomic and demographic status, and motivational and perseverance attributes) to influence persistence" (p. 65).

Some other interesting factors have been identified to help predict distance education completion rates. Kemp (2002) pointed out that a number of studies show that previous experience with distance education is associated with greater retention and lower frequencies of dropout (Coldeway, 1982;

Langenbach & Korhonen, 1988; Rekkedal, 1983). Jamison (2003) studied completion in asynchronous Web-based distance education (AWBE) courses using Motivational Systems Theory and identified predictor variables to "create a statistically significant discriminate function equation that accounts for more than 65% of the variance and delivers classification accuracies of between 93.8 and 97.5%" (p. 72). He concluded that AWBE course completion can be "predicted from motivation-related attributes of the student and course experience" (p. 73), including "goal activation, goal salience, multiple goals, goal alignment, emotional activation, responsive environment, human respect, feedback, and capability beliefs" (p. 41).

THE STATE OF COMPLETION RATES COMPARISON

Comparisons between traditional and distance education are difficult for many reasons, including inconsistent methods of calculating and reporting completion, differences in student demographics, and the limitations of research studies. Henke & Russum (2000) argues that "there is a lack of validated variables or frameworks to measure attrition within distance education courses (Sheets, 1992; Thompson, 1997; and Parker, 1999)" (paragraph 11). Due to the absence of a standardized measurement of retention, researchers should use caution in making unqualified statements about whether poorer completion rates are caused by lack of quality in distance education, because many outside variables can confound such results.

The widespread belief that completion is lower in distance education does not seem well founded—there is no national standard for calculating completion rates for both traditional and distance education programs. Many distance education administrators warn against comparing "the statistics of different institutions, since they measure completion rates differently. Some institutions, for instance, don't include in their dropout calculations those students who leave classes during drop/add periods at the beginning of a semester, while others do" (Carr, 2000, paragraph 11). Using this algorithm for calculation, many of the non-completers could simply be non-starters who simply changed courses during the add/drop period.

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