

Chapter 98

Flying SOLO for Student Success

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes how one innovative practice evolved to become an integral part of the college's efforts to increase student preparedness and success in courses so that they will be employable and competitive in the global workforce. Texas State Technical College Harlingen aimed to enhance student success in online education through implementing a mandatory class, Student Online Learning Orientation, for new online students. The course was developed as the result of faculty research and recommendations regarding online learning at the college. The majority of students at the college are underprepared and from low socioeconomic backgrounds, putting them at a disadvantage in taking these courses. Rather than a barrier to taking online classes, the goal of this class is to provide students with the necessary tools and skills to be successful. Results of the program show an increase in persistence and completion of online courses, and the course has become an integral part of the college's training and first-year experience for all students.

INTRODUCTION

Community colleges are the largest providers of online education in the postsecondary sector (Parsad & Lewis, 2008). Yet emerging data show that the success rate of students in online courses is lower than that of traditional face-to-face courses and that the difference in success in these courses exacerbates negative impacts on students of minority background (Jaggars, 2013; Xu & Jaggars, 2011). Additionally, the national completion agenda calls for an increase in the number of students completing college degrees and certificates, which many students choose to do in an online format. The upsurge in online course enrollment in combination with workplace and societal expectations places an increased importance on student success in online education.

Texas State Technical College (TSTC) Harlingen, a Hispanic Serving Institution, implemented a mandatory student online learning orientation (SOLO) course in 2012 due to concerns about student

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success and retention in online courses and student ability to use the necessary technology (learning management system, email, chat functions, search tools, etc.) required in these courses. These concerns centered on students' access to and ability to use technology tools required for face-to-face, hybrid, and online courses and students' future success as lifelong learners in the workforce. The TSTC mission is to prepare students for the workforce, which requires comfort with and use of technology, but the college is located in an area of high poverty where many students lack the resources and necessary technological skills to perform college work in an online format. It is our contention that student success in online courses translates to success in the workforce where workers may be expected to learn new technology, manipulate various computer programs, access online training courses, and communicate using online tools such as email, discussion, and video conferencing. Thus, it is imperative that colleges strive to improve student success in online courses. The experiences and circumstances surrounding TSTC Harlingen's development of its Student Online Learning Orientation reflect the experiences and challenges faced by other community colleges. This chapter describes the evolution of TSTC Harlingen's online learning program through the development of the SOLO course and its college-wide impact. It is our hope that the lessons learned and approaches we took may help others facing similar challenges.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF ONLINE EDUCATION

For the past 20 years the use of technology in education has increased dramatically, with enrollment increases in online courses exceeding that of face-to-face courses (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Lokken & Mullins, 2014). Community college students are more likely to be enrolled in online courses and programs than students at baccalaureate colleges and universities, and 97% of community colleges offer credit-bearing online learning options (Parsad & Lewis, 2008). Indeed, as the use of technology in general has increased, online education has evolved from being something different and suspect to being merely another option for students. Although acceptance of online education has grown amongst faculty and administrators (Allen & Seaman, 2014), online education is associated with both opportunities and challenges for students and colleges.

Online courses and programs are an outgrowth of traditional distance education offerings such as independent study, correspondence courses, television courses, and interactive video courses. Like traditional distance education offerings, online courses were originally conceived as a means of enhancing access to and addressing the needs of adult learners with obligations that prevented them from participating in a traditional campus-based education (Hanna, 2013). Over the years online learning has transitioned from being a primarily individual learning option, as in correspondence courses, to a collaborative learning environment (Palloff & Pratt, 2005) in which students interact with their peers and faculty members. The emphasis on using technology to enhance the teaching and learning experience has resulted in many innovative options for students taking courses at a distance. These changes reflect the shift in emphasis from teaching to learning that was experienced during the 1990s and has now evolved to an emphasis on collaboration using technology (Sorcinelli, Austin, Eddy, & Beach, 2006). As online courses and programs have integrated into mainstream offerings for colleges and become another acceptable avenue for learning, enrollments for these courses have diversified to include students from a variety of backgrounds, abilities, and geographic locations.

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