

Chapter 6

A New Model of Online Student Service in the Digital Age: Increasing Retention Based on Service Satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

During the fall 2011 semester, 1,089 students dropped an online course at Wilmington University. This loss totaled 11.8% of the initial online enrollment for the fall semester. This number is in staggering contrast to the drop rate for an on-campus course at the university: 6.6%. This chapter uses Wilmington University as a case study to explore why this problem exists and how to solve it: using student survey and administrative data to look at student expectations and satisfaction with current academic and co-curricular services; technical and service needs associated with online learning factors that facilitate course completion and recommend interventions to help keep students on track to complete courses.

INTRODUCTION

Even as higher education enrollments decline, online learning enrollments continue to increase (Allen & Seaman, 2016). Allen and Seaman (2016) reported that a total of 5.8 million students took online courses in fall 2014. But while online enrollments are growing annually, student retention in traditional on-site programs is still higher than in online education. Many factors, such as the infrastructure, quality of support systems, quality of content and assessment, and peer support networks influence the online learning experience and decrease the risk of attrition (AACSB, 1999).

Providing effective, efficient online student services is a relatively new challenge for higher education administrators (Dalziel, 2001). Roughly defined, the term “student support services” describes a variety of academic and nonacademic interactions that the student has with a college or university (Dirr, 1999). It includes pre-enrollment services (promotion, orientation), admissions and registration, academic advising, library and bookstore services, career counseling, tutoring, and social support services.

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This chapter presents a case study of Wilmington University and its five-year-old distance learning program, to explore the role of online student services in online learners' course completion, retention rates and satisfaction with the university. Specifically, this chapter will use student survey and administrative information to explore the following data points:

- Characteristics of student participants;
- Student expectations and satisfaction with current academic and co-curricular services;
- Technical and service needs associated with online learning (e.g., electronic communication, technical difficulties);
- Reasons students drop out of online courses;
- Factors that facilitate course completion, including student persistence and social interactions; and service directors' recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Current literature indicates the significance of online learning in higher education. The 21% growth in online enrollments far exceeds the less than 2% growth of the overall higher education student population (Allen & Seaman, 2010). The raw numbers are even more noteworthy. In 2009, 5.6 million students took a course online, a 1 million increase from the previous year (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Nearly 30% of higher education students take at least one online course, and there is no compelling evidence that the continued robust growth in online learning enrollments is slowing (Allen & Seaman, 2010).

Frankola (2001) claimed that adult learners drop out of online courses because of lack of time, lack of management oversight, lack of motivation, problems with technology, lack of student support, individual learning preferences, poorly designed courses, and substandard or inexperienced instructors. Distance learners are looking for online student support services that are easy to use and available at their convenience. Sahin (2007) stressed that learner perceptions and attitudes are central in the development and quality of distance education.

The most commonly referred to model in the student retention/dropout literature is Tinto's Student Integration Model (SIM). Its central idea is that of "integration": it claims that whether a student persists or drops out is strongly predicted by their degree of academic and social integration (Draper, 2002). These evolve over time, as integration varies among students depending on their level of commitment. Tinto's work on SIM (Tinto, 1975; 1993) provides a framework from which to review persistence among online students. While the Tinto model has been guiding research on student retention for about three decades, it has limited application to the nontraditional student (Tinto, 2004). Still, a Tinto theory formulated on the characteristics of a commuter student makes a closer connection to the online student than to the traditional student. Like many online programs, commuter programs lack well-defined and structured social communities—in contrast to residential institutions (Berge, 2004). Moreover, students in commuter and online programs typically experience conflicts during their studies based on obligations to family and work (Berge, 2004). Additionally, Mannan's (2001) study on distance education students revealed that social integration is significantly related to persistence in programs. Online students interacting with tutors and peer mentors over the telephone, online, or in some cases face to face appears ultimately to contribute to institutional commitment.

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