Chapter 8
The Relationship between Individual Student Attributes and Online Course Completion

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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to investigate the existence of a relationship between scores on the Individual Attributes subscales of the SmarterMeasure™ online learning readiness indicator and successful course completion in a first semester, undergraduate, online history, psychology, sociology, or English course. Archival data consisting of 433 records of student scores on the Individual Attributes subscale of the SmarterMeasure™ was used in this non-experimental, explanatory correlational research design. Controlling for the effect of course content and instructor, data were analyzed using partial correlation analysis. Results of the study suggested negligible to extremely weak, positive relationships between the individual subscales and passing grades in the designated courses. Although weak relationships were demonstrated in this study, community college administrators should strategically implement a best practices approach that utilizes an online readiness assessment within all online courses, to be completed within the first two weeks of the semester.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education faces a critical impact in the midst of a projected enrollment surge of at least 15% of internet delivered college classes for the decade between 2010 and 2020 (Dykman & Davis, 2008a). Yet, there is a documented increase in incidence of student withdrawals and lower retention rates from undergraduate students enrolled in undergraduate online courses due to limited or reduced motivation when compared with those enrolled in the comparable traditional, face-to-face courses (Braude & Merrill, 2013; Gaytan, 2009). Hart (2014) found a 10% to 20% reduction in student persistence among the

students enrolled in online courses when compared with their counterparts enrolled in the same class delivered in a traditional classroom format.

Persistence and retention rates of courses taught within community colleges have received much scrutiny by funding entities and have become a focus in the recently revised formula funding process within the state of Texas (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2012a). Consequently, measures of completion have become a vital concern for academic administrators (Atchley, Wingenbach, & Akers, 2013). Conscientious deliberations to assure no adverse effect upon course completion, academic performance, and retention rates have accompanied the addition of an online instructional mode of delivery (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2012a).

Online courses, as defined by Allen and Seaman (2011) are those in which a minimum of 80% of the content is presented and delivered in an online format. Furthermore, the conventional face-to-face courses are those in which zero to 29% of the content and instruction is delivered online (Allen & Seaman, 2011, 2014). While the intent of both instructional modes of delivery is to provide instruction and subsequently evaluate the performance of students, student attention, learning, and performance in both formats vary. Course completion results when a student persists through the entire duration of the online gateway course of history, psychology, sociology, or English and is assigned a grade of A, B, C, D, or F. (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2012bAcademic performance is generally measured by the final grade earned in the course (Atchley, Wingenbach, & Ackers, 2013). Retention is the intent to return to college to continue a program of study (Hart, 2014).

This explanatory correlational research investigated the relationship between individual attributes of online students enrolled in one gateway, introductory course and their subsequent likelihood to successfully complete courses with passing grades in their college career. After completing the SmarterMeasure™ online learning readiness indicator, students were advised of their strengths and weaknesses in the following measures: academic attributes, help seeking behaviors, persistence, procrastination, time management, and locus of control. Information on available institutional resources provided students personal guidance and direction for improving identified weaknesses. The purpose of this correlational study was to test if there was a relationship between scores on each measure of the Individual Attributes subscale of the SmarterMeasure™ learning readiness indicator and subsequent academic performance in first semester students enrolled in online courses at a mid-sized, rural community college in East Texas.

BACKGROUND

Castle and McGuire (2010) attributed the recent increases in online enrollment trends to the advantages that online enrollment provides students and administration. Namely, they addressed the flexible access to content and instruction within an accommodating time frame, the greater cost-savings resulting from higher student-to-faculty ratios embedded within the college classes, and the deeper learning experiences with enhanced student self-reflection that has ensued from asynchronous delivery modes. Embracing online instruction to meet the rising demands of students flocking to this mode of delivery, Gaytan (2009) acknowledged that higher educational administrators have also expressed growing concerns while facing issues such as students' self-discipline capacities and academic dishonesty. Therefore, Gaytan recommended organizational structures should be designed to promote and support online education and more intentionally develop practices that effectively respond to these mounting challenges.

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