E–Learning Study Skills for Online Students

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INTRODUCTION

For instructors and administrators of traditional classroom and distance learning courses alike, the leading indicators of success for college courses remain the retention and academic achievement of students. While technologies have changed many aspects of both how students study in college and how college courses are taught, the metrics of persistence and performance continue to be used by institutional decision-makers in defining success. As a result, in order to maximize our success as online instructors, we can and should work to ensure that our students have the study habits and learning skills necessary to be accomplished e-learners. Not only do such skills improve the odds that online students will be successful academically, but they also increase the likelihood that they will continue to enroll in future online or on-campus courses.

From developing time-management skills to learning how to take effective notes in college courses, students who develop functional study habits and learning skills are more likely to have a successful learning experience and continue their enrollment (Cuseo, n.d.). According the Cuseo (n.d.), "It is reasonably safe say to say that there has been more well-conducted research on, and more compelling empirical gathered in support of the first-year seminar than any other course offered in the history of higher education" (p. 1). As a result, more than 700 college campuses in the United States (FYE National Resource Center, 2000) have developed "first-year experience" (a.k.a., "student success," or "college survival") courses to teach practical study skills to today's college students. Many of these classes combine study-skills lessons with campus orientations or other college-life skills (e.g., money management, decision making) to create holistic first-year programs for students. Yet, the basic function of preparing students with the knowledge and skills necessary to become academically successful college students is consistent across the curricula.

For most online students, the development of effective study habits and learning skills is also critical to their academic achievement and retention (i.e., their success and our success as educators). After all, "students enrolling in an e-learning class must not only master the course's subject matter but also possess the technical skills to participate in the course and study effectively" (Arabasz, Pirani & Fawcett, 2003). And while many traditional study habits can be adapted for application in online courses, the development of new high-tech learning skills is also necessary for e-learning success (Watkins & Corry, 2005). Online colleges and programs have, however, been slow to adopt study skills and other preparatory courses for distance-learning students. This article provides background on the potential impact of first-year experience courses and lessons on both academic performance and student persistence, describes the unique opportunities and requirements of e-learning study skills, offers alternative formats for creating a positive first-year experience for online students, and discusses the role of faculty and program evaluations in maintaining the long-term success of any first-year experience initiative.

BACKGROUND

According to the U.S. Department of Education, distance education courses accounted for more than 3.1 million enrollments at colleges and universities in 2002 (Thomas, 2003). These completely online courses, furthermore, represent only a fraction of the number of on-campus courses that are using the Internet and computer technologies to facilitate learning in subjects ranging from physics to foreign language. As a result, the number of students relying on online technologies to support their college education is growing everyday, and according to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 49% of today's

college students first began to use the Internet when they entered college (Jones, 2002).

While it is probable that the number of students entering college with minimal Internet experience will diminish in the coming years, the concerns of faculty regarding the online application of effective study habits and learning skills (by students of all ages) is likely to be ongoing. For example, can students apply critical thinking skills like note-taking and questioning when reading online journal articles? Can online students utilize effective substitutes for non-verbal cues when class discussions take place in an online chat room rather than a traditional classroom? Are distance learning students able to maintain consistent levels of academic motivation in courses that that do meet on-campus?

For online instructors, concerns of student readiness for distance education are central to how they plan and deliver online courses. These apprehensions are also often amplified by concerns of educational equivalency (i.e., the approximate parity of online and classroom courses)(see Watkins & Schossler, 2003) and the substantial drop-out rates of many online courses. Although no definitive figures are available on retention rates in online college courses (IHEP, 1999), it has been suggested that distance education courses retain 10-20% fewer students than traditional classroom courses (Carr, 2000).

Even if these estimated retention rates are three- or four-times the actual rate, the impact of drop-outs on the success of distance education course is considerable, both in terms of the academic achievement and persistence of students. College students drop-out or under-perform for a variety of reasons, including personal, institutional, and circumstantial variables (Berge & Huang, 2004). For online students, the factors influencing student achievement and retention are most often quite similar to those of on-campus students. Yet, the online classroom typically creates unique variations of the problems, such as poor online technical support, inferior course design, social isolation, strained time management, and/or deficiencies in e-learning study skills (see Hughes, 2004).

Whether your online students under-perform or leave courses for financial, motivational, commitment, or instructional reasons, active interventions that offer a positive first-year experience for online students is likely to be at least part of the solution for improving student performance and persistence. For on-campus programs, first-year experience courses (i.e., college survival or student success programs) have demonstrated success. Research indicates that first-year experience lessons, courses, and programs improve student retention in their first year of college, increase total number of college credits earned, reduce time to attain a degree, improve persistence to degree earned, and increase first-year GPA and cumulative GPA at graduation (Cuseo, n.d.). The collected evidence supporting the positive outcomes of first-year seminars is documented in the 1998 monograph by Barefoot, Warnock, Dickinson, Richardson, and Roberts.

Cuseo (n.d.) states that undoubtedly, the positive outcomes of the first-year seminar have been the more carefully and consistently documented than have the outcomes of any single course in higher education, and its positive effects on student retentionand academic achievement have been demonstrated in a wide variety of institutional settings. (p. 1) Yet, among online courses and programs, the use of first-year experience courses and concepts are largely not applied at academic institutions. As a result, many students enter the online classroom unprepared to be successful learners in the new environment; after all, success in the traditional classroom doesn't always translate into success when college courses require the use of online technology.

While many students arrive at college with remarkable skills for searching retail Web sites and downloading music from the Internet, most have little experience or knowledge regarding how to effectively use online technologies to advance their studies. In a report prepared for Educause, Morgan (2003) affirms that despite the popular myth that students are technologically savvy and converse mainly through instant messaging and e-mail, the study illustrated that faculty members discover that many students are not proficient with technology—"[Faculty members] consistently report that their students seem to have inadequate technology proficiency and that this inhibits their CMS [course management system] use." As a result, building skills for communicating effectively when using e-mail, synchronous chat rooms, or asynchronous discussion boards are among the basic study skills that many online students must be taught in order to be successful in the high-tech classroom. Additional skills, like creating a positive study environment and building constructive online relation-

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